

Undercurrent Of The Progress Of Women In India

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Received: 12 Jan 2020, Accepted: 19 Jan 2020, Published on line: 30 Jan 2020

Abstract

Woman as being the victim was the underlying discourse of the Indian women's movement in its early phases. The feminists focused on the many ways in which physical and psychological violence was used to keep women subordinated to the hierarchies of family and society. The systematic victimization of women was challenged by the feminists by their breaking their silence on the violence endured by them. Many of the urban middle class Indian women have thus consciously refused to be victims and have broken the chains which bound them and have emerged free. They have tested their abilities and strengths in all fields and it is this flowering of independence and personal power which is the essence of empowerment.

Key words- Undercurrent Of The Progress , Women In India, empowerment.

Introduction

There is no doubt that that we are in the midst of a great revolution in the history of women. The evidence is everywhere ; the voice of women is increasingly heard in Parliament, courts and in the streets. While women in the West had to fight for over a century to get some of their basic rights, like the right to vote, the Constitution of India gave women equal rights with men from the beginning. Unfortunately women in this country are mostly unaware of their rights because of illiteracy and the oppressive traditions. The words of Dr. Ambedkar, father of the Indian Constitution on empowerment of women stands relevant in today's context. He had described that the best religion in the world is the one which teaches liberty, equality and fraternity and these are undoubtedly true in India's context today in all sectors particularly in respect of women in India.

The Constitution of India guarantees equality of sexes and in fact grants special favours to women. These can be found in three articles of the Constitution. Article 14 says that the government shall not deny to any person equality before law or the equal protection of the laws. Article 15 declares that government shall not discriminate against any citizen on the ground of sex. Article 15(3) makes a special provision enabling the State to make affirmative discriminations in favour of women. Moreover the government can make special laws in favour of women. Article 16 guarantees that no citizen shall

be discriminated against in matters of public employment on the grounds of sex. Article 42 directs the State to make provision for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief. Above all the Constitution imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen through Articles 15(A) (e) to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

All these are fundamental rights. Therefore a woman can go to the court if one is subjected to any discrimination. When we talk about constitutional rights of women in India, we mainly refer to those areas where there is a tradition or tendency for discrimination against women, and special laws have been formulated to fight those tendencies. The most important issues are those pertaining to marriage, children, abortion, crimes against women, and inheritance.

In ancient times Aryans were the main inhabitants of India. These people were mainly Brahmins and they used to give the status of goddess to the women. At that time women enjoyed no less than status of Lakshmi (goddess of wealth) in the households. A famous Sanskrit shloka signifies the status of women in that era, “Yatra naryastu pujiyante, ramante tatra devta” meaning, “ The place where women are worshipped god themselves inhabit that place”. The women of ancient times had immense power this is evident from a South Indian legend that once a king accidentally killed the husband of a woman and she had such powers that she burnt the whole kingdom to ashes. Women in that time had place even superior to men. They had representation in each arena from assemblies to religious rituals. In fact no religious ritual of Hindu Brahmins was supposed to be complete without the presence of the women. Ancient Indian women had a say in each and every aspect related to their lives. They had the right to choose their own life partners. The process of choosing the life partner of own choice was known as Swayamvar in which grooms assembled at the house of bride and she used to choose the one whom she liked. Women were not just confined to domestic arena but they were also part of religious teachings. In ancient India women like Gayatri Maitreyi, Anusuya were renowned seers of their time. This shows that women had the right religious teachings. They were not prohibited even from learning. They could learn whatever they wanted.

The status of women of Vedic era began to decline with time. Gender inequality started creeping into the society. Slowly women's status degraded to such an extent that they were not given the freedom, which was available to even Sudras. They were not given the basic rights. They were debarred from religious practices. They began to lose their political freedom as well. As Vedic age progressed, the status of women became worst. And till the time of Smritis the condition became so bad that women were not allowed free access to education. They were given education related to just domestic purposes.

Medieval India was not women's age as it is supposed to be the dark age' for them. Medieval India saw many foreign conquests, which resulted in the decline in women's status. The problems related with women resulted in changed mindset of people. Now they began to consider a girl as misery and a burden, which has to be shielded from the eyes of intruders and needs extra care. Whereas a boy child will not need such extra care and instead will be helpful as an earning hand. Thus a vicious circle started in which woman was at the receiving end. All this gave rise to some new evils such as child marriage, sati, jauhar and restriction on girl education.

The plight of women in medieval India and at the starting of modern India can be summed up in the words of great poet Rabindranath Tagore. :

‘O Lord Why have you not given woman the right to conquer her destiny

Why does she have to wait head bowed,

By the roadside, Waiting with tired patience,

Hoping for a miracle in the morrow ?

The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. If on one hand she is at the peak of ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members. As compared with past women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way. Their path is full of roadblocks. The women have left the secured domain of their home and are now in the battlefield of life, fully armoured with their talent. They had proven themselves. But in India they are yet to get their dues. The sex ratio of India shows that the Indian society is still prejudiced against female. There are many problems which women in India have to go through daily. These problems have become the part and parcel of life of Indian women and some of them have accepted them as their fate like malnutrition, poor health, maternal mortality, lack of education, mistreatment, overworked, lack of power, marriage, dowry, female infanticide, divorce etc. In India, a large percentage of women do not have power. They cannot take decisions independently not even related to their own life. They have to take permission of male members for each and every issue. They don't have any say in important household matters and not in matter of their own marriage.

The 1970s saw the beginning of the gender revolution and the conscious articulation of women's aspirations. The 20th century will always be known for the major transformation in Gender Revolution. “The women's movement and a pro women commitment to social change - or a feminist perspective on diverse dimensions of the change - emerged among different regions and peoples at

different points of time. Their engagement with prevailing ideological currents - promoted pathways of mutual influence (Mazumdar: 2012).

The Indian Republic started its course of planned development with its First Five Year Plan in 1952 and its course of planning through the 12 Five Year Plans and intermittent annual plans reflected the gradual understanding of women's question and gender and governance equation and efforts to introduce programmes to address the issues involved. A reflection on the story can "trace the evolution of ideas, strategies, concrete measures in policy/ programmes/planning interventions" introduced in India. It also shows that though the Indian planning has moved beyond "the still persisting invisibility of gender based difference in the outcome of actions by the state or other agencies of society" it is still facing numerous challenges as every initiative brings up new issues and concerns.

The 1980s saw awareness about the need for women's participation in planning and development. The invisibility of rural women's work, the labour force participation data ignoring their engagement as unpaid family workers and in free collection of food and services as they were not considered to be 'gainfully employed' were seriously debated. The non-recognition of women as independent economic units was also seen reflected in low wages and under evaluation of their work.

So what are the challenges for planning for women in India in view of the experience of all the initiatives introduced so far? Can the planners move from the household based approach to women in the households to ensure equitable benefits to them in the publicity funded programmes. What can be the strategies to address the patriarchal apathy and resistance to make governance and gender equation a reality? Is the state itself being patriarchal in making its programmes not conform to the rhetoric and objectives of gender just governance and of empowerment of women in the allocation of resources and in the implementation of laws? We need to introspect. Women have shown themselves equal to every challenge. When they have had access to education they have outperformed the male candidates. Their contribution to the family and to the state is valuable. It is so even when they do so with shouldering multiple roles and responsibilities at home and outside. The planning for them has to be not as for a weaker section but with recognition of their potential as equal citizens. The programmes should reach them as individuals and not only as members of specific households. If the discourse today is of women's empowerment, it should be followed in planning and implementation to enable them to develop their potential and not with an approach of treating them as passive beneficiaries even unconsciously. Women who have been entering rural and urban local bodies in every election are a powerful resource. Let them

not be constrained by inadequate decentralization of powers and programme resources and free play of subtle patriarchal capture.

By the mid 1990s, the movement (and its actors) had moved on. From being a fringe activity, feminism had become a major current of contemporary Indian thought. The struggle shifted from the streets to seminar halls. The media spotlighted a handful of the savviest activists and turned them into stars. Voluntarism gave way to full-time activity, supported by private sources or research grants. From solidarity in the struggle against society and the state, contemporary feminism has deteriorated into a competitive struggle for the projects and grants that government departments and donor agencies dangle before activists.

All macro data suggests that the situation of the mass of Indian women is scarcely better than it was in the 1970s. Some may argue that attitudinal change, brought about by feminist activism and the spread of ideas of women's liberation and emancipation through the mass media, has resulted in empowering women vis-à-vis men. While ideas of women's equality may have gained currency in public life and media discourse, these have not yet penetrated deep enough to have radically changed social attitudes. A superficial acceptance of modern notions of equality of the sexes is scarcely enough to combat centuries old patriarchal ideas and institutions. It could be argued that ideas of female equality did not arise with the post-1975 women's movement but in fact have been current in Indian political thought and action for over a century. During the struggle for India's independence, ideas of equality of the sexes had gained currency and many women had felt sufficiently empowered to break the shackles of domesticity and enter public and political life. However, the broader Freedom Struggle had overshadowed women's struggle for personal freedom. The liberties and social freedoms allowed to many women leaders and activists in the pre-independence period were permitted only because they were fighting for the nationalist cause. In those times of crisis, women played an "emergency role" in emerging from their homes to struggle on the streets, join 'prabhat pheris' and protests, burn foreign cloth, court arrest and even go to jail. They were hailed as heroines. Many women showed extraordinary courage and made incredible sacrifices in the freedom struggle. They experienced real empowerment.

Yet, once Independence was won, the majority of women retreated to what was considered their natural, normal domain – the home. Some continued to be active in social work. Very few chose to play an active role in political life. Many were simply not given the opportunity. Although the nationalist leaders had promoted women's education and emancipation, these ideas had not radically altered the people's perspective. In the euphoria of a new, free India many naively believed that women's

emancipation would come about once modern education was made available to the mass of the Indian people. However, the Constitutional promises to provide universal education within ten years within ten years was broken by an indifferent government that did not allocate adequate resources to basic education. While the government-subsidised school system expanded rapidly, it did not keep pace with the growth in population.

Now the most important factor has to be taken into account that of women's education which in turn would give them jobs and a good life and identity accompanied with self-respect. The sharp divide between what is masculine and what is feminine needs to be questioned. Such an approach would help educators.

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