



Progress Towards Gender Egalitarianism: A Reality Check

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ABSTRACT

After independence, empowerment of women has always remained the major thrust of Indian plans and policies. Besides floating various schemes exclusively for the well-being of the women, many stringent laws have also been enacted from time to time to narrow down the huge gender gap which persisted at that time. This paper is an attempt to study how far these efforts have been successful in bridging that gap and empowering Indian women.

KEYWORDS : Gender, Egalitarianism, Empowerment

INTRODUCTION: It is a proven fact that across the globe, men present better scenario than women with respect to the socio-economic and religious indicators though the degree of disparity may vary from country to country. In India, the condition of women has remained pitiable since ancient times which worsened further in the medieval era due to the various evils practiced against them like Sati Pratha, Parda, Child-marriage, Infanticide, Dowry etc. Thus, after independence, improving the condition of women emerged as the major issue for the rulers of our country and their upliftment and empowerment has always remained the major thrust of Indian planning and policies. While in seventies the policies focused on the welfare of women, in eighties thrust was on their development which further shifted to their empowerment in nineties. Some of the important measures adopted by Indian planners for empowering women include:-

- Various Articles of our Constitution enshrine the principle of gender equality.
- Passing of Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971.
- Formulation of National Plan of Action for women in 1976 as a guiding document for the development of women.
- Passing of Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1983.
- Enactment of Family Court Act, 1984.
- Passing of Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986.
- Formulation of a National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000) advocating a holistic approach towards their development.
- Setting up of National Commission for Women in 1992.
- Ratification of CEDAW (Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women) in 1993.
- Passing of Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994.
- Acceptance of Beijing Platform for Action at the fourth world conference on women in 1995.
- Reservation of seats for women in urban and local self-governments.
- Free and compulsory education for all children in the age group 6-14 years.
- Enactment of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act in 2005.
- Adoption of Millennium Development Goals.
- Besides these, various other policies like The National Nutritional Policy, The National Policy on Education, The National Population Policy, all have significant components for women aimed at their empowerment.

No doubt, all these measures have led to the improvement in the status of women but only to a limited extent. A lot still needs to be done. Even after more than 65 years of independence our society is still a male dominated society where women are suppressed and oppressed at each and every stage of life and treated as inferior to men. It is really disheartening to note that a country with great power ambitions is ignoring the rights and concerns of one half of its population to its own peril. India's women are undoubtedly breaking new grounds but we, as a society, have miles to go before we can claim to be truly

gender egalitarian. Myth-logically woman is SHAKTI and worshipped as "DEVI" and "MATA" in temples but sociologically in concrete houses reality is totally different. Despite such a hue and cry towards empowerment of women if we see the figures, they tell a very different story.

FACTS AND FINDINGS: The following facts depict the harsh reality:

Global Gender Gap Index: As per the latest Global Gender Gap Index ranking released by the World Economic Forum (WEF) for the year 2013, India keeps company with the worst in the world. Among the 136 countries evaluated by WEF, India is ranked 101. The Forum measures the size of gender inequality gap in the four critical areas as depicted in table 1 below:

Table 1: India's Position in Gender Gap Index in last four years:

| | 2013 | 2012 | 2011 | 2010 |
|--|------|------|------|------|
| GENDER GAP INDEX | 101 | 105 | 113 | 112 |
| Economic Participation & Opportunities | 124 | 123 | 131 | 128 |
| Educational Attainment | 120 | 121 | 121 | 120 |
| Health & Survival | 135 | 134 | 134 | 132 |
| Political Empowerment | 9 | 17 | 19 | 23 |
| Participating Countries | 136 | 135 | 135 | 134 |

Source: WEF's the Global Gender Gap Report 2013

Thus except in the area of political empowerment (thanks to reservation of seats for women in urban and local self-governments) India has ranked very badly in the rest and in case of Health and Survival, our country is at the bottom. However the pertinent question which needed to be answered is that if Indian women are politically empowered why they are always at the receiving end? The reason for this clearly lies in the fact that even after being elected they are not able to exercise their authority and assert their power in a male dominated society. They are actually governed in their actions by the males only. Thus higher ranking is of no use unless women actively take part in the decision making process and they are actually treated at parity with men. Further, if we look at the 16th Lok Sabha, it has just 61 women MPs, constituting only around 11% of the total strength in Parliament. The figure is a far cry from the 33 per cent mark that Women's Reservation Bill seeks to implement which is pending in Lok Sabha after being passed in the Upper House of Parliament. Let us hope that with passing of 33% reservation bill the women will be in a position to raise their voice in parliament as well. However, a bill that took 14 long years to pass would take how long to become a law is another story.

Sex Ratio: Another important social indicator used to measure the extent of prevailing equity between males and females at a given point of time is the sex ratio (females per 1000 males). India cut a sorry figure here also as Indian sex composition is heavily skewed in favor

of males as depicted in the table below:-

Table 2: Sex Ratio

| Year | Sex Ratio (Total) | Sex Ratio (0-6 yrs.) |
|------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 2011 | 943 | 919 |
| 2001 | 933 | 927 |

Source: Census of India 2011

Generally, in a normal world, the female population equals or slightly surpasses the number of males but the situation is just opposite in India. A study by Dr. Prabhat Jha, Director of the Centre for Global Health Research at St. Michael Hospital and the University of Toronto, Canada in 2006 estimated that 10 million girls have gone "missing" from India's population since 1985 because of the practice of selectively aborting female fetuses. Further, the sex ratio between the age group 0-6 years has shown a declining trend portraying the existence of discrimination towards females which is happening despite the laws being in force to save the girl child. Unless stringent measures are adopted this imbalance in sex ratio will lead to many other social problems

Education: Another indicator where we still have a long road to travel and which is a key enabler of demographic change, family welfare and better health & nutrition of women and their families, is education of women. No doubt if we look at the female literacy rate, there has been considerable improvement since independence but gender inequality still persist.

As per census 2001, the literacy rate (7+years) for women stood at 53.67% as against 75.26% for males which rose to 64.64% and 80.89% respectively in 2011. But if we see the age wise sex ratio of school attendance, the picture is very gloomy. Despite Government's policy to provide free education to all children below 14 years of age, the sex ratio of children attending the school in the age group 6 to 17 years is 889 girls per 1000 boys. The gender differentials increased with the age as the sex ratio of children attending school which stood at 957 in the age group 6-10 and at 984 between age group 11-14 years declined drastically to 717 between the age group 15-17 years. The figures clearly show that the girls are being denied the right to have higher education. If we really want to bring gender equality and empower our women mere primary education will not serve the purpose rather we need to have higher education and skilled women force.

Employment opportunities and promotions: In the area of employment opportunities and promotions, it is an open truth that women have to face the problems just by virtue of their being women. If well qualified women are available, still preference is given to a male of equal qualification. Majority of the Indian women are employed in agriculture sector only. The occupation distribution of employed women in India for the year 2005-06 is given in the table below:

Table 3: Occupation Wise Employment of Indian Women

| Occupation | Women Workforce |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Professional/Technical/Managerial | 6.5% |
| Clerical | 1.8% |
| Sales | 3.7% |
| Services | 6.8% |
| Skilled & Unskilled labor | 22.1% |
| Agriculture | 58.8% |

Source: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in India, Special Report, NFHS 3, August 2009

Another noteworthy point here is that though about 60% of employed women are in the agriculture sector, they barely constitute 11% of the landlords in the country. Indian women, thus even don't own the land they toil on all their lives.

As per the findings of aid group Oxfam, India ranked the second lowest in the Group of 20 (G20) economies when it comes to

women's participation in the workforce. It is above only Saudi Arabia, a country that does not allow its women to drive. That is bad enough, but it doesn't end there. India is one of the few countries where the rate of participation of women in the workforce has drastically declined in the last decade. It fell from 33.7% in 1991 to 27% in 2012, according to UN gender statistics.

Top Level Managerial Positions: It is really an alarming sign to see that the proportion of Indian women in senior positions is showing a downward trend. According to the findings of a study by Grant Thornton, titled International Business Report, the proportion of women in senior positions in the Indian workforce fell from 19 per cent in 2013 to 14 per cent in 2014 as against 24% across the globe in 2014. The report states that Indian companies have negligible female representation in senior roles such as general/office manager, director and president/vice president. Further, the report found that despite the increasing impetus to address the lack of women at the top, half of all Indian business have no programme to support or mentor women, nor do they plan one in the near future.

Women in Boardrooms: According to a study by McKinsey & Co, female representation on executive boards of Indian companies currently stands at a meagre 5 per cent.

Table 4: Position of Women on Board in BRIC Economies

| Country | Women on Board(%) |
|---------|-------------------|
| Brazil | 7.7% |
| Russia | 4.8% |
| India | 4.7% |
| China | 8.1% |

Source: GMI Ratings' 2013, Women on Boards: Survey

According to data compiled by Bloomberg, nearly half of the top 100 companies traded on the Bombay Stock Exchange including the biggest two by market value, do not have even a single female member on their boards.

Gender Pay Gap: India faces a severe gender gap not only in terms of number of women in the payroll but also in terms of remuneration as women employees are getting far less pay than their male counterparts. In India, they earn 62% of the men's salary for equal work, according to WEF.

According to the Monster Salary Index India IT Sector Report 2014, women constitute only 30% of the total IT sector workforce. This most modern sector of India is not only predisposed to a certain gender but is also paying lesser to women employees than their male counterparts and the fairer sex also faces a huge gender pay gap of 29%. Same is the story in other sectors of the economy.

Health Indicators:

On health front also, women have unequal access to basic health resources and they lack adequate counseling especially in rural areas. A shocking study has revealed that half of the world's malnourished children belong to India and are the result of lack of nutritious food available to mother. Two out five children between the age group of 0-3 years are under weight. High prevalence of low birth weight, high morbidity and mortality in children are the result of poor maternal health and nutrition and it continues to be major concern in India even today.

Crime against Women: if we consider the crime graph and violence against women, it is continuously on the rise. As per NCRB, in the year 2013, 309546 cases of crime against women were reported while the figure stood at 244270 in 2012.

Khap Panchayat:

In recent years another anti-women movement which is spreading its wings especially in the states of Haryana, Western Uttar Pradesh and parts of Rajasthan, is in the form of Khap Panchayat. These khaps issue fatwas without giving the fair sex an opportunity to be heard. The Khaps are an all exclusive men domain and women are not even

allowed to sit when a decision is being made. The young girls are routinely threatened, abused and killed all under Khap verdicts. The question women's rights does not exist anywhere in the territories ruled by Khap Panchayats. Even Governments have failed to do much to check and control the power of Khap Panchayats.

Gender Budgeting Allocations:

If we look at gender budgeting allocations, the government's per capita allocation for women centric schemes is less than Rs 1200 per woman per annum. According to the gender budgeting, statement analysis by Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA), per capita allocation increased from Rs 410 in 2007-08 to Rs 1000 in 2009-10 and to Rs 1190 in the following year. For the year 2013-14, a significant amount of Rs 97,134 crore have been earmarked for women in gender budgeting allocation. However, mere allocation of money isn't enough; timely release of funds and their proper utilization is equally essential.

Conclusion: To conclude, all these figures and data support the view that India has miles to go before being called the gender egalitarian society. Even after 65 years of independence, we have feudal and

patriarchal society. Of course there is no denying that many of the efforts have paid off but the outcome is not worth the efforts made. Government cannot do anything without the co-operation of the society. The need of the hour is a complete change in the mindset of every individual. It is important to usher changes in the societal attitude and perceptions with regard to the role of women in different spheres of life. Adjustments need to be made in traditional gender specific performance of tasks. The division of labor that a woman is supposed to do household chores and a man is the bread earner for the family has to be removed. If we are able to create an environment where women are considered as a blessing and not a curse, half of the problem will automatically be solved. Every man needs to have a strong determination to honor every woman. Only then empowerment in its true meaning will be realized. To make India the next superpower, let us all pledge towards giving women their much deserved status.

Swami Vivekananda had said, "That country and that nation which does not respect women will never become great now and nor will ever in future".

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