Research Paper Political Science

Empowerment of Women an Overview

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ABSTRACT

The concept of "inclusivity" of women that lynchpins any and every aspect of socio-economic transformation. Whether that be financial inclusion or that be the governance itself that is based on the fundamental of "inclusivity"; the term itself has gained traction over the recent years particularly in a nation like India which aspires its governance to play the role of a just-arbitrator. The only way to reach to that village who is dispossessed and do not even think herself to be part and parcel of this economy is to make her an active stakeholder. This could be done by making the whole concept of governance imbibe into the virtues of 'bottom-up' approach. Give power to the village and they will become aware, active and responsible. 'village democracy' is that model of governance that makes the principles of democracy percolate to the "last man". Henceforth, inclusivity in governance can only come from making the Panchayat Raj Institutions also called the third tier of governance politically dynamic and economic self-sustainable. With only inclusivity in governance, the fruits of financial inclusion can be sustainably "harvested".

Keywords : representation, discrimination, gender, empowerment, inclusiveness, participation, strengthening, recognized, marginalized, accountability, implementation

Introduction

People's participation is one of the main ingredients of democracy. It is only through it that the responsiveness of elected representatives is proved and people also come nearer to government. Mutual trust is developed between the ruler and the ruled, which alone ensures the success of democracy. Discontentment among the masses is taken care of because people can express their views and disclose their feelings and aspirations freely before their elected representatives. Elected people can know the social and economic problems of the masses and try their best to meet the grievances of the people. As against it, if the gap between the people and the elected representatives goes on widening, the situation may become explosive in democracy. It was only in such situations that people rose in revolts against rulers at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century in regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Even after 63 years of our independence, women are still one of the most powerless and marginalized sections of Indian society. The 2001 Census shows that the sex ratio for India is 933, which is among the lowest in the world. Percentage of female literacy is 54 per cent against male literacy of 75 per cent. Women's representation in Parliament and in the State Assemblies has never gone beyond 8 and 10 per cent respectively. Most of the working women remain outside the organized sector. Mere 2.5 per cent women are administrators and managers. Violence and atrocities against women are on the rise. Gender discrimination is the major problem, which the Indian women face in the present day society.

Jai Prakash Narayan had expressed his views in the following words: "Let us not have only representative government from the village up to Delhi. One place at least, let there be direct government, a direct democracy. The relationship between Panchayat and Gram Sabha should be that of Cabinet and Assembly." It was really the concept of Ganchiji's Swarajya – democracy at the grass roots. Thus, the Grama Sabha was really to develop into an institution capable of exerting effective influence on the village Panchayats.

Even Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India, was of the opinion that "local self-government was and must be the basis of any true system of democracy. People had got into the habit of thinking of democracy at the top and not so much below. Democracy at the top could not be a success unless it was built on this foundation below." Almost every great leader who believed in democracy wanted it from below.

Even in Karnataka, field data indicate that attempts have been made by the Gram Panchayat to identify the felt needs and aspirations of the people by holding Gram Sabha meetings. These meetings have been called by giving enough publicity by distributing pamphlets and by beating the drum. As regards participation in Gram Sabha meetings, on an average, 25-30 electorates have been participating in the meetings. There is a strong feeling among the electorate that both the officials and the non-official members are found to be in the forefront as far as initiating the projects and taking final decisions are concerned, which smacks of the requirement of people's participation in the decision-making process. The common man is hardly consulted and participation is restricted to elite persons only.

Gandhi and Empowerment of Women in India

On the whole, Gandhi's consistent efforts for the liberation of women and his immense faith in women's moral conduct made women's struggle for rights and equality as an integral part of the struggle for national independence. Women's participation in large numbers in 'mass' movements led by him made a big breakthrough in Indian women's lives. In 1885 the Indian National Congress was founded and in its 1889 Bombay session, the women participated. Gandhiji's call to women and large scale participation of women in the freedom movement brought about changes in the perception of other nationalist leaders as well. Gandhiji's delineation of the role of women in society is blurred with gender-dominated patriarchal value system. Though too progressive of his times, Gandhi could foresee women's role of that of a 'producer; women as mother and keeper of hearth and this he held, exhorts her

to keep off from public life. Moreover, Gandhi's framework for women's position in social life is a "long suffering selfless and self-effacing." But this capacity for silent suffer which Gandhi idealized may be regarded as one of the key symptoms of her subordination "a glorified cult of eternal womanhood." Were much deep rooted. The change has to be brought from within, this is what he thought and worked upon until his last breath, thereby setting an example for the generations to follow. Gandhi, therefore, deeply emphasized upon the economic independence of everyone - both men as well as women.

Political empowerment of women is necessary for their emancipation. In recent years many steps have been taken so as to increase the participation of women in the political system. The Women's reservation policy bill is however a very sad story as it is repeatedly being scuttled in parliament. Further, there is the Panchayati Raj System, where women have been given 50% representation as a sign of political empowerment.

Globalization and Women Empowerment

Within the past two decades, globalization has created a tremendous impact on the lives of women in developing countries. Globalization can be defined as "a complex economic, political, cultural and geographic process in which the mobility of capital, organization, ideas, discourses, and peoples has taken a global or transnational form (Moghadam 1999). In India today, globalization has had positive and negative implications within the male-dominated society. Even though India's constitution grants women legal citizenship, Women get very little respect and standing in this country. With the help of the media, women's organizations have helped to advance women in the workforce, creating an increase in the standing of women. Even though globalization is broadening the workforce for women, it can have a negative impact by exploiting women in dangerous jobs, in which they are overworked. Globalization can have a positive or negative effect on women in India, but with globalization there is the power to uproot the traditional views towards women so they can take an equal stance in society.

Role of Self Help Groups in Empowering Women

The basic objective of the self help group scheme is to promote participation as a means to increase efficiency, decrease cost of service delivery, integrate group activities in market, and promote disadvantaged groups in decision-making (otero and Rhyne, 1994). From the early 1970s, women's movements in a number of countries identified the absence of accessible credit as a major constraint on women's earning capacity. Micro-finance has been promoted as an entry point in the context of a wider strategy for women's economic and socio-political empowerment. Women's demand for credit and savings facilities is high; savings propensity as well as loan repayment rates among women are equal or exceed those of men. The 1980s saw the emergence of poverty-targeted micro-finance institutions like Grameen Bank and others, many of which saw them as empowerment-oriented. In the 1990s, a combination of evidence of high female repayment rates and the rising influence of gender lobbies within donor agencies and NGOs led to an increasing emphasis on targeting women in micro-finance programmes.

- Optimism about the impact of sustainable self-help activities on the empowerment of women.
- Recognition that empowerment has a limited impact but helps the smooth running of economic activities of the poor.
- Empowerment has a limited impact but helps to alleviate poverty.
- Empowerment activities are a waste of resources.
- SHGs as Social Capital
- The features of social capital as pointed out by Putnam are reflected in the SHGs.
- For instance:
- Close social relationship and solidarity among the members of a group or organization.
- The norms governing their reciprocal relationship.
- Mutual trust and collective action to pursue common objectives.
- Strategies to solve problems.

Micro-finance programmes not only give women and men access to savings and credit, but reach millions of people worldwide bringing them together regularly in organized groups. Although no magic bullet, they are potentially a very significant contribution to gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as pro-poor development and civil society strengthening. Through their contribution to women's ability to earn an income these programmes have potential to initiate a series of virtuous spirals of economic empowerment, increased well-being for women and their families and wider social and political empowerment. Micro finance services and groups involving men also have potential to question and significantly change men's attitudes and behaviors as an essential component of achieving gender equality. Women are not a minority, but the marginalized majority and gender best practice must become a fully integral part of programmes design. This is not only a women's human right, but necessary for any serious agenda for poverty reduction, economic growth and civil society strengthening.

Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women

Democracy is a popular form of government as it is based on the will of the people. However, democracy is not merely a form of government but also a way of life, an order of society, a way of social and economic relations and above all, a belief system. Such a political and socio-economic system is based on the ideals of dignity of citizens, principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, justice and a government having accountability towards its people. The implementation of these ideals and principles require certain conditions which may be called as the pre-requisites of democracy. There pre-requisites are essential in every sphere – social, economic and political. The social conditions require; equality of status and opportunity, equality before law, educationally and culturally developed citizenry and absence of all kinds of discrimination. Economic conditions require absence of widespread inequalities, fulfillment of material needs for a dignified human existence, justicable distribution of resources, equal opportunity for gainful employment, equal pay for equal work and protection against discrimination. Political conditions include rule of law, equality of citizens and equal opportunities for participation in political affairs, guaranteed and protected rights including freedom of thought, belief and expression. It also includes freedom of participation in civil and political processes, government by the people or their representatives, free and fair elections and respect for dissent and opposition.

Empowering Women through Panchayat Raj Institutions.

The objective of changing power relations in all areas of life is an extremely difficult task, especially in developing societies like India. However, modest beginning in that direction can be made, The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, 1993 is one such important step towards women's empowerment. A decade is too small a unit of a time to review and measure the changes in the situation of women's power. Nevertheless, the redeeming feature of the last ten years' (1992-2003) experiences of enabling and empowering women in local public affairs is encouraging (Joshi, 1994; Ramathilagam, 1995; Devi, 1998) Joshi (1994) has further observed: "Despite overall increase in education and political awareness among women in Gujarat, their share of power by way of representation in elected offices is very less. However, it is found that 50 per cent of the women leaders have entered politics through their involvement in Panchayat Raj Institutions.

Retrospect

If we assess the empowering processes in respect, we find as follows:

a) Women's involvement, participation and representation in PRIs was not wholly absent before 73rd Constitutional Amend Act, 1993

b) However, the 73rd amendment has brought about sea change in their involvement and participation. An increase of 33 per cent women's representation in PRIs is a major change. In a way it is a silent revolution, i.e., a sudden and invisible change.
c) It is a moot point as to what extent the rural women are prepared for this suddenly expanded role and functions as panchayat members or office bearers of PRIs.
d) Reported that levels of education, perception, awareness about their role were inadequate. Lack of self-confidence was reported.
e) Improvements of educational level, age groups, awareness and perception. This is a major benefit of the enabling and empowering processes during the last decade.

Challenges

As in all such social transformative processes, sudden formal empowerment through legislation do not yield intended results. It is a slow and gradual process. It meets several challenges as follows:

a) Being women in rural socio-cultural setting itself is a major handicap to empowerment. This is so because of the fact that rural setting is extremely male-dominated. Hence, we often hear of puppet role of women as behind whom either there is a person like husband, brother, son or father or in-laws(panda, 1995)
b) The limitations of social customs, traditions and practices have hindered their real empowerment. This is evident in the near absence in setting of women's agenda in PRIs. Raising issues of women's interest and intensive participation in meetings of panchayat (Das, 2002).
c) Their household role as home-maker and home-keeper is also reported to have come in way of their performance. This is a general case as most working women face this burden of double responsibility(Jhunjhunwala, 1995)
d) It is feared that the challenges of this relationship of power at home, in society and in office may not change for a long time to come. And, to that extent, their role will remain formal, namesake and restricted. Through the initiatives among at empowering and enabling of rural women at large is going to be a difficult mission (Devi, 1998).

Conclusion

Women in India feel proud to display that they are well protected and pampered by their husbands without realizing that they are making themselves helpless. Such women's economic literacy is so low that they cannot play any role in family's decision regarding family's budget, savings and investments. To such women, the national budget discussion is for men only and soap operas are for them. Such women suffer a lot if something untoward happens to their husbands. This type of extreme dependency is not good for the development of women. Women should remember that they are also rational, intelligent and thinking human beings. Dependent women are not empowered women. If modern women think that they are empowered, it's a myth for them. Empowerment means to inspire women with the courage to break free from the chains of limiting beliefs, patterns and societal or religious conditions that have traditionally kept women suppressed and unable to realize their true beauty and power. In the end I would like to conclude with the following words, "Women as the motherhood of the nation should be strong, aware and alert".

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