

Women Empowerment : A Study of Political Status of Women in India

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The present thesis is organized into seven chapters, analyzing political status of women in India along with economic, social and legal aspects, in context of women's empowerment.

Empowerment, contains within it, the word power. So naturally it follows that empowerment is about power and about changing the balance of power. As far as the women's empowerment is concerned, it is about gaining autonomy and control over one's life which includes many dimensions such as economic, social and political. Comprehensively, "Women's empowerment is a state of being that reflects a certain level of critical consciousness about external realities and an awareness about their internal thought construction and belief systems that affect their well being in terms of gender justice and social justice, as well as the determination to use their physical, intellectual emotional and spiritual resources to protect their lives and sustain values that guarantee gender equity at personal, social, economic, political and institutional level."

At the over all level, women's empowerment aims at changing the balance of power between the sexes so as to create a more equitable distribution of power in society. However, when we examine this over all process of women's empowerment more closely, we become aware of the economic, social, political and legal dimensions of the process. Each of these dimensions is interlinked to the other, and have a bearing on each other.

"Economic Empowerment" implies a better quality of material life through sustainable livelihoods owned and managed by women. By "social empowerment" we mean a more equitable social status for women in society. "Legal Empowerment" is the provision of an effective legal structure which is supportive of women's empowerment and "Political Empowerment" means a political system favouring the participation in, and control by women of the political decision making process and in governance.

Thus, the study of Women Empowerment seems like premature unless their political status in India is assured and no study in political arena in the democratic set up can be possible without taking into consideration women's political role and position. In this regard it can be stated that women's rights and women's equality cannot be achieved unless women in large numbers are visible and active politically, socially and economically. At this juncture in our polity it is important that awareness be engendered

and increased about the need to involve more women at decision making levels. This is an essential factor in promoting and maintaining policies and measures for the fulfillment of the goal of Indian democracy and constitution.

Though women's contribution has been immense at the time of freedom struggle and the role played by women in national movement was a big support because of which freedom movement became a success. Both the population participated equally in national movement. Women like Rani Lakshmi Bai, Kasturba Gandhi, Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu and many popular and known women leaders and activist are still remembered and respected for their contributions. Many women who were either mothers, wives or sisters of freedom strugglers also had their share of participation in freedom movement. Women also launched their own movements in urban, rural as well as tribal states and irrespective of any class, society, religion or status played an important and crucial role in national movement. Many acts were also passed for benefit, welfare and development of women which were accepted by society. The first chapter deals with profiles of these known and unknown women activists who also shared an equal credit for freedom of India.

But with freedom of the country, women started losing their political control and decision making power which they immensely exercised during freedom struggle. Freedom of the country brought sufferings for women socially, economically, physically, mentally and above all politically. Representation of women in both the upper and lower house did not, even exceed 10% mark. Women's participation as voters increased, with increase in population index, but many a time voting was influenced by the dominant male members of the family.

Though some women held high position at decision making level like Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, but their number as a whole does not present a good picture of women's political status as a whole. Thus to increase women's participation at political level a demand to have 33% reservation for women in both the houses is going on.

But, the lawmakers of the nation feel that they can reserve seats for the backward, the deprived and the marginalized, but not for women. In their eyes despite being violated against, despite the sexual, psychological and physical assault on them, despite economic dependence and deprivation, despite a heavily patriarchal legal code, and despite a plethora of social tradition meant to suppress the woman, she is not marginalized enough, not discriminated enough, not deprived enough to merit reservation in Parliament.

The Women Reservation Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha on September 13, 1995. The Bill that was supposed to be passed on the very same day is still a far cry towards reality.

The campaign for women's reservation in the Lok Sabha and legislative assemblies has been going on for last many many years. The initiative is to establish political equality to women as guaranteed in the constitution. The campaign has created sustained public interest from grass roots onwards to assert the rights of women. The idea is to pave the networking and alliance with different groups of women activists all over the country trying to evolve the identity of women as one political constituency in India. Since, no real democracy is possible in India if the question of equality between women and men is not regarded as one of the constitutive elements of our political system, as well as universal suffrage, the separation of powers and accountability.

So, Chapter II deals with his various aspects of political status of women in India as a whole. After independence, the Indian government with a view to decentralize administration, formed a new institution called Panchayat. This new actualization of an old concept was an attempt to democratize the village community. When, the old panchayat system was limited to male-dominant caste males, the present system seemed to be more egalitarian.

This new institution with two reserved seats, one for women and the other for a representative of the lower castes was an effort to empower people at the grass root level, to make development initiatives on their own. Thus, 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 (Article 243D (3)) has succeeded in drawing women from hearths and making them join the mainstream of village life. A birth in the Panchayati Raj system for women has no doubt empowered women to the extent envisaged by the advocates of 73rd Amendment.

Chapter III thus focuses on panchayat and women's participation and the impact of reservation of 33% for women at local level. Chapter IV politico economic bases of empowerment basically deals with politics and economics as an essential agent for women's empowerment. Since many years it has been observed that if women are independent economically and are active and aware politically, the path to achieve empowerment becomes easy. But, the situation is not so satisfactory since women at both levels i.e. urban and rural and at urban this situation is more grim since inspite of working for long hours they are paid less and are economically still weaker. They do not enjoy same property rights as that of men and is still dominated by this patriarchal society Statistics support that women are still not economically sound, but they are in a race to be economically independent and to have a say in economic field. Politically also, women do not exercise decision making powers and are influenced by their male counterparts to make any political decisions.

To improve the situation of women, government and states are taking several initiatives for over all development, empowerment and welfare for the girl child and women. Many policies and programmes are passed by government in this regard. But in reality, the picture is different because, today also women faces insecurities in form of sexual assault, domestic violence, trafficking, exploitation and sexual abuse, and some problems like problem of poverty, illiteracy, poor health facilities and her rating as second class citizen are some factors which are a big hurdle in path of empowerment of women. No doubt, that government is taking several steps but women as a whole are not being

benefited by these steps. So Chapter V state initiatives and Indian women peeps into the situation of women which they are still facing.

Chapter VI analyses that without empowerment of women, the process of nation building cannot be complete until women as a whole become empowered physically, mentally, socially, economically, politically, and scientifically and become free from the grip of violence, illiteracy and sexual exploitation, a nation cannot become strong and cannot achieve development in totality. Therefore, empowerment of women is not just her empowerment but if a women is empowered her family is empowered, whole nation is empowered because ultimately it's the women who as a mother, as a creator of society, as a source of strength for retaining moral values and social ethos in the coming generation certainly contribute a great deal in building a nation and the movement for women's empowerment is bound to make major contribution towards nation building.

Chapter VII concludes that in today's world women are becoming a force to reckon with. Their increasing participation in every area of work is an indication enough to possibly reduce male domination. It is alarming that in the estimate of the total illiterate population of India 62% are women. In the process the children get affected by this. In this regard enhancing women's participation in political and economic development is the key to their empowerment. There is definite need to educate women and mobilize them to take up course of actions so as to influence policy decisions of the government towards their empowerment.

In a country like India, with strong tradition of democratic functioning, a vibrant public opinion and influential sections of society interested in progress, welfare, development and empowerment of women, the movement for women's empowerment as a totality is bound to gather strength and women as a whole irrespective of any region, religion, caste, class or age will be empowered in real sense, be it political, economic or social empowerment.