

Empowerment of Indian women in the 21st Century – A General Perspective

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“Women entrepreneur according to Government of India is an entrepreneur, who runs an enterprise owned and controlled by her and having minimum financial interest up to 51% of the capital giving at least 51% of the employment to women.” Women entrepreneur is one, who initiates, organize and operate a business enterprise. In developing countries like India such Innovations are found less in number when compared with advanced countries.

The following are some of the reasons for emerging women entrepreneurship

- a)Not finding a job
- b)Unable to work in her house
- c)New challenges and opportunities for self – fulfillment
- d)Proving their innovative skills
- e)Need for additional income.

Swami Vivekananda observed that lack of education weekend the self – confidence of majority of women in India. He drew pointed attention of the people towards the fact that self – confidence was more than half of the “Secret of Success” in life. Women education of the right type which leads to characters, foundation, strengthening of mind, development of the intellect and self – reliance.¹

According to Rammanohar Lohia, the emancipating of women was the foundation of social revolution, without this there can be no prosperity. Mahatma Gandhi was a strong advocate of women’s rights. His successful call to women to join the national movement served as a catalyst for the wider participation of women in Public affairs.²

Historical Background of Women Empowerment in India

The status of Women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millenium. In early Vedic period Women enjoyed equal status with men. Rigveda & Upanishads mention several names of women sages and seers notably Gargi & Maitrey. However, later the status of women began to deteriorate approximately from 500 B.C., the situation worsened with invasion of Mughals and later on by European invaders.

Some reformatory movements by Guru Nanak, Rajaram mohan Rai, Ishwarchandra Vidya Sagar, Pandita Rama Bai and others did give some relief. It is not that Britishers didn’t do anything for improving the condition of women. Some laws were enacted such an “Abolition of practice of Sati”, Widow Remarriage Act 1856 etc.

The real change came after independence. Constitution of India guarantees equality to women (Article 14). There are other articles too which ensure rights of women e.g. no discrimination by the state [article 15 (1)] equality of opportunity (Article 16) etc. Feminist activism picked up momentum in India during later 1970's. Later on many groups and NGO's have been working for the Empowerment of women. We are proud that in India Women got voting right much before USA and some other European countries.

Women Associations

1. The international council of women convened its first meeting in Washington in **1888** to advance to women's social, economic and political rights.
2. The founding members of women Indian Association in **1917** were Mrs. Annie Besant, Mrs. Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinarajadasa.
3. The National council of women in India was renamed as All India women's organization established in **1925**.
4. The eighth session of the Andhradesa constituency conference was held on 17th November **1934** at the Besant Hall, Madanapalle under the presidency of Srimati. G. Durgabai Deshmukh.³

Empowerment –Conceptual Framework

The origins of the concept of empowerment go back to the civil rights movement in the USA in the 1960. The empowerment of women is located within the discourse and agenda of gender equality and is increasingly being taken in the agendas of international development organizations, perhaps more as a means to achieve gender equality than as an end in itself. At the Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1993 and the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo 1994 Governments committed themselves to the empowerment of women. This commitment was operationalised and formulated into a clear action plan at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 where Governments committed themselves to the “empowerment and advancement of women, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, thus contributing to the moral, ethical, spiritual and intellectual needs of women and men, individually or in community with others and thereby guaranteeing them the possibility of realizing their full potential in society and shaping their lives in accordance with their own aspirations.

Indian Constitution

The constitution of the country provides for equality of opportunities to all citizens irrespective of race, sex, caste and communities. Recently the Supreme Court has highlighted the right of the women in India to eliminate gender based discrimination particularly in respect of property so as to attain economic empowerment.

The Constitution Framers were very much conscious of the problem of women empowerment hence they ensured that the Principle of Gender Equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental duties and Directive Principles. The various articles mentioned in the earlier paragraph are meant for ensuring gender equality. Moreover the Constitution also empowers the states to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. The real impetus for this movement was gained when under the Priministership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, a scheme known as Indira Mahila Yojana was launched, and UNDP also incorporated issues of women upliftment as Primary objective. Various Schemes were later on launched for the empowerment of women such as Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Mahila Samridhi Yojana, Self help groups at Panchayat level and many more. The establishment of National Women's Commission and State Women's Commissions were important milestones in the direction of Women Empowerment in India.

National Commission for Women Act, 1990

The Union Government of India under the leadership of V.P. Singh in 1989 felt that the task of the development of women through their empowerment would not be possible in the absence of a commission for women who act as a nodal agency- a watch dog to safeguard the interests of women and advise government on all issues concerning women.^{3(a)}

National policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001

The National policy (2001) was formulated with a view to bridging the gap between the goals enunciated in the constitution, legislation, policies, planning, programmes and related mechanisms on the one hand and situational reality of the status of women in India, on the other.

Some of the important features of the policy include their active participation in decision making including the political process at all levels, adopting a gender perspective to ensure main streaming of women in all developmental processes, as catalysts, participants and recipients.⁴

The policy was aimed at ensuring women empowerment through positive economic and social policies for the full development of women, so that they could realize their full potential. The policy assured equal access to women to health care, quality education, participation and decision making in Social, Political and Economical life of the nation. The National Policy also aims at strengthening legal system for eliminating discrimination against Women. It also visualizes strengthening partnership with Civil Society, particularly Women's organizations.

Education and Women Empowerment

Education is a powerful tool of social transformation. Hence, education for Women has to be paid special attention. Greater access for women to education must be ensured in the educational system. Gender sensitivity must be developed. A watch has to be kept on dropout rate of girls and corrective measures should be taken to check the dropout rates.

Role of NGO's in Women Empowerment

Governmental Organizations are formal agencies working for the empowerment of women. But this work requires multidimensional approach and hence a large number of voluntary organizations / NGO's have gained increased attention in the field from grass – root level to national & international level. Their role is so impressive because they work with missionary zeal and commitment. The working style of NGO's is open, transparent and personal. So, they are more effective in this direction. They organize seminars, conferences and workshops for the awakening of the masses. Their mass appeal – style contributes to a better understanding of women's rights and of the means to ensure the enjoyment of those rights and the elimination of discrimination. They prepare urban and rural uneducated women for self – employment, which is vital for the economic empowerment of the women. In short, all these programs and functions of NGO's contribute towards the realization of sustainable community development and hence women empowerment.

Women Welfare and Empowerment in India

In India, policies and programs at different levels of the government cover various dimensions and strategies in gender development. Over the years, efforts have been made to empower women socially, economically, and politically. However, due to a lack of synergy and coordination, the achievements are not satisfactory. It is imperative that an integrated policy and strategy be formulated to address the economic, social, and political issues related to women, along with the requisite programs and schemes. Though India has created protective legislations for women, the enactments have not been easy to implement. The vastness of the country, the scattered nature of women workers, their lack of education and legal literacy, and the indifferent

attitude of government bureaucracy have all contributed to the continuing vulnerability of women. This is true not only for unorganized rural women, but also for urban women workers. Although the constitutional commitments to women find reflections in the planning processes, legislation, policies, and programs of the central and state governments, the current socio-economic status of women is unsatisfactory in terms of almost all important indicators of human development.⁵

January 4-10, 2010 is Women's Self-Empowerment Week

The national recognition of women's self-empowerment is intended as an opportunity for women (and men) to reflect on the important roles that women occupy in society. Another intended goal is that women recognize and observe the variety of ways we contribute to making our families and communities better. More specifically, "women's self-empowerment" or "female empowerment" has become synonymous with "feminism" or "women's liberation"— *which is not the case*.

Influential Women of 21st Century

Indira Priyadarshini Gandhi (19 November 1917 – 31 October 1984) was the third Prime Minister of India and a central figure of the Indian National Congress party. Gandhi, who served from 1966 to 1977 and then again from 1980 until her assassination in 1984, she is the second-longest-serving Prime Minister of India and the only woman to hold the office. Indira Gandhi was the only child of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. She served as the Chief of Staff of her father's highly centralized administration between 1947 and 1964 and came to wield considerable unofficial influence in government. Elected Congress President in 1959, she was offered the premiership in succession to her father. Gandhi refused and instead chose to become a cabinet minister in the government. She finally consented to become Prime Minister in succession to Lal Bahadur Shastri in 1966. As Prime Minister, Gandhi became known for her political ruthlessness and unprecedented centralization of power. She went to war with Pakistan in support of the independence movement in East Pakistan, which resulted in an Indian victory and the creation of Bangladesh, as well as increasing India's influence to the point where it became the regional hegemony of South Asia. Gandhi also presided over a state of emergency from 1975 to 1977 during which she ruled by decree and made lasting changes to the constitution of India. She was assassinated in the aftermath of Operation Blue Star. In 2001, Gandhi was voted the greatest Indian Prime Minister in a poll organized by India Today. She was also named "Woman of the Millennium" in a poll organized by the BBC in 1999.⁶

Meira kumar (born March 31, 1945) is an Indian politician and a five time Member of Parliament. She was elected unopposed as the first women Speaker of Lok Sabha on 3rd June 2009. She is a lawyer and a former diplomat. Prior to being a member of the 15th Lok Sabha, she has been elected earlier to 8th, 11th, 12th and 14th Lok Sabha, wherein she remained Cabinet Minister in the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (2004 – 2009).⁷

Mamata Banerjee (born January 5, 1955) is the leader of the Trinamool Congress and Leader of the Opposition in the state of West Bengal. She is the founder and Chairperson of the party and has been the held the position of Union Minister for Railways in the Republic India. Mamata is popularly known as "Didi" – the elder sister to all her followers in West Bengal. Now she is the present Chief Minister of West Bengal.⁸

Jayalalithaa Jayaram (born 24 February 1948), commonly referred to as **Jayalalithaa**, is an Indian politician who has been the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, a state in southern India, since 2011. Previously she served as Chief Minister from 1991 to 1996, briefly in 2001, and from 2002 to 2006. She was a popular film star in Indian cinema before her entry into politics, having appeared as main female lead heroine in over

140 films which includes films in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and worked in one Hindi film. She is the incumbent general secretary of All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). She is called *Amma* ('Mother') and sometimes *Puratchi Thalaivi* ('Revolutionary Leader') by her followers.⁹

Indu Jain belongs to the Sahu Jain family and is the current chairperson of India's largest media group, Bennett, Coleman & Co. Ltd., which owns the Times of India and other large newspapers. Her net worth is said to be US Dollars 4.4 billion, making her the 17th richest Indian in the world.¹⁰

Lalita D. Gupte Joint Managing Director of ICICI Bank (India's second largest commercial bank), until October 31, 2006, is an important figure in India's banking and financial services sector. An INSEAD alumnus, Gupte was listed by the Fortune "as one of the fifty most powerful women in international business." She is currently the Chairperson on the Board of ICICI Venture and a board member of Nokia Corporation. On 22nd June, 2010 she was appointed as member of Alstom's Board of directors.¹¹

Priya Paul (born 1967), is a prominent woman entrepreneur of India, and currently the Chairperson of Appeejay. The Park Hotels chain of boutique hotels. She joined the company, after finishing her studies in Economics at the Wellesley College (US) working under her father, as Marketing Manager at the Park Hotel, Delhi, at the age of 22.¹²

Conclusion

The Empowerment of women has become one of the most important Concerns of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. Efforts by the Govt. are on to ensure Gender equality but Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and Women have full opportunities of Self decision making and participating in the Social, Political and Economic life of the Country with a sense of equality.

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