



Women Empowerment: A Sociological ‘Reconstruction’ in the context of India

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ABSTRACT: Human beings are endowed with extraordinary abilities and the high-order thinking which made the creation of society possible. Every norm, structure and institution was meant to allow human beings adapt to the environment; it was essential to have a certain control mechanisms so that we could be differentiated from animals. Every society hence created culture which is nothing but a way of life. The physical differences are natural but the institutional differences are created by human beings, it is more than the normal competitive urge that human beings have to win. That's why we saw society getting divided on the basis of caste, creed, religion etc leading to consequences for those who did not have the so-called characteristics. Out of all the inequalities that human race has witnessed, discriminatory attitude against women stands out. Women belong to the same species as men do and yet since historical times have been trying to fit in the society that has given us so many claims as to why they need to be controlled. The issues pertaining to women start from biological framework to the deepest socio-psychological levels. This paper explores the very inception of women empowerment and why there is a need to develop a sociological understanding of the changing ideas about women empowerment using feminist methodology and feminist theoretical perspectives.

KEYWORDS: Feminist methodology, sociological understanding, women empowerment

I. INTRODUCTION

II. Empowerment is a process that focusses on the idea of decision making in which there is a need to be included in the process of decision making. In the quest to grow and become better we created, destructed, fought, made peace, struggled and survived. Every era had its own challenges and offered a specific set of resources or we may say advantages. Inequality, injustice, dissent can be understood as obvious outcomes of many situations. The emergence of social structures paved way for stratification which was a way of functional

segregation and allocation roles and resources but it could not hinder prejudice and discrimination. History is covered with the facts that how human society survived through differences based on caste, religion, race and ethnicity etc. As we became civilized we chalked out various plans that could lead to the betterment of human beings but we also saw how the urge to have power led to the creation of a society that had to accommodate unequal structures essentially. The very discrimination met with dissent, protest and struggles at various points of history. Women faced varied struggles throughout the history, and in the case of women unlike other groups her very existence at disadvantage was glorified. Women have not been able to form a coherent group like others it seems which is why it was felt that she had to be empowered. So yes, women had to be provided platform to end eulogizing of inequalities faced by women. It was not a simple issue that could settle with a display of dissent but something that had to come up through various policies and schemes. The word empowerment replaced the term development so that the idea of restoring power and advantage become clearer. The issue of women empowerment is a global phenomenon. But we must know that what empowerment means and what do we expect when we are hinting at women empowerment. According to Rowlands(1997) in order to understand the process of empowerment we must be aware of all the forms that power is likely to take; the power can be controlling where the process of victimization becomes weak because there is resistance, power can be productive that leads to new possibilities, it may lead to solving problems as a group and it can be also be a spiritual strengthening of self. In the case of women, they need powers in all these available forms at some or other type.

III. Women empowerment is not about the mere survival of women, (although being born and surviving had also been a challenge for women as far as the trends of foeticide and infanticide are



concerned), but there has to be an environment that leads to physical, mental and social growth. It is beyond what we term as the basic survival, women must lead a life of dignity, development has to be holistic. According to Mandal (2013) empowerment of women can be categorised into five parts-social, educational, economic, political and psychological. Social Empowerment of women means that women must be able to find the right place in social relations and the social structures. The discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, disability, caste and race hinder social empowerment for people. For women it is more about the status accorded in the society and how she is bound by the social norms and the expectations from women at the macro level of society. Educational empowerment is the most important for human race for the overall development. Education provides knowledge and hones the skills needed by human beings for a dignified and powerful survival. The intellectual concerns are important for all. For women, it is important so that there are possibilities to skillfully contribute to the society and to themselves. The women have to be made aware, they have to be eligible for the job market that could satisfy all the essential needs. In fact, without educational empowerment, attaining gender parity is almost difficult because validated knowledge is the source of empowerment. Women should be able to gain greater control over the material resources of the society and hence economic empowerment of women is globally stressed upon. Economic empowerment for women would mean rightful wages and salaries, ownership of certain assets that can provide for financial stability in the longer run. There has to be an easy access to money for women specially the ones who come from disadvantaged sections of the society. Political empowerment is yet another and influential type of empowerment that can improve the position of women in society at global levels. Women must be connected to the process of political participation, globally women had to wait for getting the right to vote and there are nations which have still not connected women to democratic or other political processes. Voting along with enough women representatives is what can truly bring empowerment at the political level. According to Mahatma Gandhi, empowerment may mean equal status to women, opportunity and freedom to develop herself. When we discuss the macro level changes we wish to see, we can see how women also struggle to take control of their bodies and minds. The incidents of different types of violence, standards of behaviour, beauty and interaction that are set for women affect her at the psychological

level. After empowering women in all the parameters, if we fail to help her gain the required confidence how can we expect her to take up greater roles in the society. Women suffer from lack of confidence when comes to the simplest of decisions that need to be taken. For example, a woman before stepping out would be conscious of what she has to wear and her decision is usually based on the constructed social appropriateness.

IV. So as we surround the very concept of women empowerment, we can understand a lot of effort is needed at micro and macro levels. Every individual needs to question when she/he is experiencing empowerment or not. Women empowerment cannot be defined rigidly because the situations are changing, women have evolved in both intellectual and social terms. The change in the position of women is visible in her participation in all those sectors where we expected to see only men. Women are emerging as leaders, breaking the existing stereotypes and trying to reconstruct the idea of dignity and freedom for themselves. We need to examine women empowerment again, not through indices but through the perception.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Nair (2020) in her article titled 'Metropolitan Feminisms of Middle - Class India: Multiple Sites, Conflicted Voices' discusses how women are associating themselves with the various changes that are happening across the world and how there is a conflict between the desire to redefine identities and the existing role expectations. The presence of women in educational institutions and professional fields are leading to the ideas of liberty for women surfacing but in the larger context respect that comes with marriage and submissiveness is desirable for women too. She lacks agency in most of the matters.

V. Gautam (2018), Women in Indian Mythology: Seeking Order in the Chaotic Interpretations examines the positional growth of women from ancient period in India till the early medieval period. In her paper, she observes women from both Ramayana and Mahabharata to bring out the contrast and similarities. In Ramayana, the characters of Sita and Kaushalya glorify the ideal of 'pativrata' as the former gave into the expectations of family and society time and again and entrusted her honour to her husband; the latter parted with her son only to stand by the decisions taken by the patriarch in the family again signifying the importance of marriage and upholding the marital values over everything else, on the other hand we have Manthra and Kaykayi who were selfish, power -



seeking and ambitious. In Mahabharata, unlike the women in Ramayana who were by and large seeking validation and protection from men, there was a visibility of political expertise, intelligence and decision-making power among women. Perspectives based on mythology have not been able to bring drastic changes for women because chastity and submissive roles of women are more desirable.

VI. Tandon (2016) in her paper Women Empowerment: Perspectives and Views attempts to broaden the concept of women empowerment in which she observes the need to specifically focus on cognitive, psychological and economic components. A woman has to feel autonomy within the family and the society because we see discrimination at both these levels. The women must be provided with the conditions where they feel self-confident because low self-esteem is something that is instilled because of the gendered socialization. Economic autonomy is one of the most important aspects of determining freedom for women as it will lead to transformation in the society.

VII. Paik (2014) in the chapter "Education, reform of women and exclusion of Dalit women" brings out the outlook of society towards the dalit women. The key points that she discusses here were the overall discrimination against women receiving education existed in the pre-independent era where even the national leaders like Tilak also felt that

English education can be a hindrance to the girls who may want to lead a worldly life. Education was only seen as a means to orient women more towards the household responsibilities. In modern period of Indian history women from elite upper caste could struggle and create a space for themselves but the same was not true for Dalit women who had to really struggle.

VIII. Vasulu T.S., Ghosh B., Bharati P., Pal M. (2011) discuss the problem of women going missing and has given the reports from other Asian countries. The problems of sex selective abortions are a reality and the reasons are just not economic but the deep roots of patriarchy playing a relevant role even in the economic gaps witnessed between men and women.

IX. Ghosh (2011) ropes in the situation of women in Colonial South Asia with the contributions of various other female authors namely Padma Angol, Tanika Sarkar, Nita Verma etc to discuss the women's resistance in the changing colonial state, their liberty in the public spheres. The book discusses about the impact of legislations on women during colonial period. The women remained passive towards developments in public spaces and within the social spaces they did experience a lot of freedom.

III. OBJECTIVES:-

1. To explore the idea of women empowerment in the context of Indian women.
2. To discuss women empowerment from the standpoint of Indian women

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research paper is based on secondary approach. Interpretative approach has been used for writing the paper. Secondary sources have been consulted to write the paper.

Women Empowerment through the lens of Feminist Theorizing

Before we discuss the theoretical perspectives, we essentially have to delve into the fact that there is something that laid the foundation of women empowerment. Empowerment means enabling someone who is without power and authority to have a say. Women had to be empowered because like any disadvantaged group experienced women also were deprived to enjoy rights that they were entitled to by very nature of their existence which in turn led to normalizing of exploitation of women in our society. Patriarchy is the reason why we see perpetual differences between men and women. If patriarchy was not there, the question of empowerment wouldn't have surfaced. Most of the societies gave acceptance to a system where men

dominated social, political and economic structures. We were made to believe that power cannot be channelized or cannot find its right place unless it is wielded by a man. Women support men, they have to assist and accommodate as their roles are more relevant to the society. The economic functions, political dominance, codifying norms went to men and we continued to embrace it and saw patriarchy as the only possibility for a stable society. Gerda Lerner in her book, 'The Creation of Patriarchy' discusses the very roots of patriarchy and exposes us to the details how patriarchy was created and there was nothing as natural about patriarchy. The simple division of labour where men had to go gather food and hunt down animals, women maintained home, looked after the family and we ended up believing that this is how the system work. Lerner also tells us



that feminism has to look at the historical details where it was visible that the reproductive role of the women took over their entire social identity. We became what we were told or what history said. Feminists were occupied with the idea to find traces of society where women dominated or had more power than men because that could justify the demand for equality by women. Looking at various societies, mythological details, varied kinds of societies we have been able to notice the presence of powerful women in mythology who are a part of our religious faith, for example we can say Goddess Durga or Kali symbolize power or we collected evidenced where the societies were matriarchal, matrilocal and matrilineal. The book concludes that a mirror image of patriarchy never existed in the history and that is an important detail.

The theoretical perspectives of feminism are a reaction to the patriarchal structure. It took ages for the women to realize that the image of happy women that they were clinging to was in fact an exploitative system that curbed their freedom. The waves of feminism and ideas of various theorists shaped a new set of thoughts. The structural inequalities were highlighted through the ideas of the women. This was definitely a breakthrough because when the victim speaks, there is validation, it churns the thought process.

According to radical feminists, men are the main beneficiaries of the subordination of women. They take male violence to be a part of the system that controls women and it is not a psychological issue which some men face. Radical feminism in fact says that a woman is controlled to a great extent in the social structure that dismantling the structure could be the only possibility for restoring justice. Marxist feminism on the other hand does not recognize a separate institution of patriarchy but according to this perspective man's domination over women is the by-product of capitalistic system. The capitalistic structure benefits from the unpaid labour of women within the household as they work to support men who are directly involved in the process of capitalism. The labour hours rendered by women don't count for economic evaluation and hence inequality continues to exist for women. Liberal feminism focused on the inequality women face because of prejudiced attitudes. Since liberal feminism was based on documentation of the lives of various women, it was felt that the existing attitudinal changes are responsible for women's situation. Post-modernist feminists relied on Derrida's concept of deconstructionism of Derrida, discourse analysis of Michel Foucault and the post-modernism of Lyotard for their

understanding on the situation of women. Their intention was to challenge the notion that gender relations are fixed and natural. Since post-modernism believed that there can be varied experiences so instead of finding commonalities, it is more relevant to understand the different opinions.

On observing the feminist theories we can say that they could not offer concrete solutions to all the issues that women face but feminist theorizing led to the acknowledgement of the fact that women are victims of inequality. Even if they are provided with economic and social security by the male dominated society, all of that has a huge cost and that is freedom. The structuring of the society is such that women contribute to strengthening patriarchy. Feminist theories may be criticized for essentialism, for not giving too much importance to discover and identify the growth of patriarchy and a lot of it may stem from how biological roles of both men and women led to inequality. The ideas of feminism don't entirely form the basis of women empowerment because where feminist theories led to discourses and awakening among women, the idea of empowerment wanted to build agencies that could chart the plan for social, political and economic participation of women.

Indian Experience of Women Empowerment: An analysis

Indian society has unfortunately seen a regressive trend as far as the idea of gender equality is concerned. According to Rig veda women got married at a mature age and also had the freedom to choose their life partners. There are several intellectual women about whom scriptures mention like Gargi and Maitrayee who were eminent scholars of those times. Women had a relatively high status, but it was not a society that escaped patriarchal structure as religious obligations and division of labour suggested that the contribution of men was more substantial. As the early Vedic period ended, the imposition of patriarchy became along with other structures of the society, we not only saw the rigidity of class system (varna system) but also women's position started deteriorating and the process of exclusion started. We don't have details who made a remarkable political presence in the later Vedic period but the society set a different benchmark for ideal women. Women were expected to accept their husbands as their 'masters', as the typical ancient Indian references to a husband are 'Pati', 'Swami' and 'Nath' all of these words literally indicate that men had to be more dominant.

It is to be noted that women were deprived of education and other social benefits and her



confinement to the four walls of the house became an essential practice which means all the places where a woman could assert herself were no more accessible to her. The trend continued in medieval period when Mughals came and during that time women had to accept the purdah system, the society had the practice of sati. It is interesting that before Mughals established their prominence India had Begum Razia Sultan who ascended the throne after her father Iltutmish died and ruled Delhi from 1236 to 1240. She was only female ruler India ever had. There is no clarity over how she died but she definitely was criticized by the nobles who found it hard to accept the rule of a woman. So it can be concluded that a woman had to be obedient, skillful enough only to perform household duties and also allow men to own her sexuality and let the society pass judgment over her conduct. The texts like Manusmriti expected the society to respect women giving a rigid doctrine for women to follow where she had to be dependent on men throughout her life and at the same time men were cautioned against the distracting beauty of women and her destructive schemes. People still go by the same ideas which is why there is always a dress code for women and certain behavioural standards. The burden to bring honour to the family entirely lies on the shoulders of a woman.

Moving ahead in the historical timeline, the British period introduced reforms because of the initiatives taken by some Indian intellectuals. Sati was banned and widow remarriage got legal sanction. The purdah system was fading and issue of educating women started gaining prominence. However, it was noted that there was almost kind of division of labour when it came to people of so-called lower castes and tribes, the upper caste women received education but had to brace up for marital duties and dowry system was more prevalent in the upper castes. Women played a notable role in the freedom struggle; Rani Laxmibai, Annie Beasant, Captain Lakshmi Sahgal, Pritilata Waddadar are few women who contributed. After India gained freedom there were great efforts to elevate status of the women. Education for women was promoted and the society started to acknowledge the discriminatory and violent practices against women. It was realized that upliftment of women can happen only if there is a strong determination on the part of the society. It was stressed that women must become a part of the decision making. The Ministry of Human Resource Development and the National Commission for Women have come to the fore to safeguard the rights of the women and emancipate their position in the society. The 73rd and 74th

amendments gave special powers to the rural women too as they could participate in the process of democracy by being leaders. At the macro level, we have been able to support women by making laws that protect them against domestic violence, dowry demands, sexual violence etc. There is no denying of the fact that the legal measures and change in the attitudes of the people owing to the trends of modernization and globalization contributed to women empowerment and overall we have statistics that show the participation of women in productive sectors outside home. But we cannot end the process of women empowerment or say that equality has been achieved because we still see barbaric incidents of violence against women, political and public shaming, educated and working women report abuse against their husbands, women of labour sector are denied their rightful wages.

In the 21st century we see a different kind of woman who puts herself before others and is questioning that why she is denied the basic freedom. Every time the society appears to be allowing freedom to women rather than women claiming it. There have been changes in the expression of women. They excel in education and their careers but ultimately are expected to give importance to their traditional roles. Women by and large are working for more than 15 hours a day. The society refrained from acknowledging that this is exploitation. Women are tuned to believe that they have to manage both family and work. The household duties hinder her professional presence and her workplace denies her to have space for emotional needs where she may battle to be a good mother, or any other social role that also holds importance to her. Media had become very powerful and outspoken as far as female presence is concerned

V. CONCLUSION

There is an attempt to deconstruct the image of a woman who is beautiful and excels in every kind of work she does. There is a new meaning of empowerment that is being sought. It is not about fiction but the realities that surround us. The '#me too' movement in which women celebrities reported sexual harassment against popular and reputed men of the society was for sure was a great display of courage on the part of women to open up about sexual misconduct but it was upsetting that the women had to remain in closet for so long before reporting their experience. The society was divided on the credibility the movement had. For some it was a gimmick but for some it was a huge step. But all over the world it is clear that



there is a need to reconstruct the meaning of women empowerment for a country like India which is deep rooted in traditions and also allows modern ideas to flow in. Now it is the time to move beyond how we can define women empowerment but see how women wish to reconstruct the meaning of the same by their ideas.

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