

Gender Inequality and Women Empowerment in Indian Society: An Evaluation

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India is one of the most populous countries in the world. Nearly half of the population of 1.4 billion is women. In ancient times, women were considered worshipful, but with the development of civilization, due to various historical, social, cultural and economic reasons, the women community became a victim of inequality in all areas. Institutions related to patriarchy, division of labor and commercialism played an important role in this inequality.

In the last decades, the determination and implementation of policies, decisions, plans and programs of the legislature and governments have brought positive changes in the status of women in some areas. In view of this, the Nari Shakti Vandan Act has been brought so that women get the right to represent themselves and take decisions in their own context. This political participation will definitely complete the task of women empowerment.

Keywords: concept of gender inequality, factors of gender inequality, role of government, local self-governance, nari shakti vandan act, conclusion and future.

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1. Introduction

It is known that at present the population of India is about 1.4 billion. About half of this population is of the female community. The status of women determines the condition and direction of a nation or society. Since ancient times, women have been considered worshipful in India and women have been glorified as Shaktiswaroop and worshipful. The sutra mentioned in the ancient religious texts of that time, "Yatra Naaryastu Pujyante Ramante Tantra Devata" shows the strong status of women. With the development of civilization, due to various historical, social, cultural and economic reasons, the nature of society became patriarchal. Although in the last decades, there have been respectable and positive changes in the status of women in some areas, but in most areas the status of women remains that of a dependent class. Broad indicators related to nutrition, health, education, employment, economic, social, cultural and political participation show the weak position of women in society. Institutions related to patriarchy, division of labour and beliefs related to market society also play a role in this. Marx had said that "various dimensions of social progress can be measured by the social status of women."¹ Therefore, it is now necessary to clarify the concept of gender inequality.

2. Concept of Gender Inequality

Gender inequality means discrimination against women on the basis of gender. The concept of gender draws attention to various aspects of socially constructed differences between men and women. Currently, it is used in the form of cultural ideals and notions related to masculinity and femininity and in structural terms as gender division of labour in institutions and organisations.² Traditionally, women have been seen as helpless, weak and a weak class in society. Women constitute almost half of the total population of the world. For this reason, the widespread and far-reaching effects of gender discrimination are reflected. This affects every pillar of society.

3. Factors of Gender Inequality

Despite social, economic and political progress, patriarchal mentality still exists in a complex form in modern Indian society. Due to this, women are still considered a responsibility.

Women get less opportunities for development due to social and family customs. Due to which their personality is not able to develop fully.

Women in society are victims of inequality in just values like education, health, economic opportunity and political leadership. By making these four dimensions of gender inequality as the standard, the data released by the Global Gender Gap Index shows that at present India has been consistently ranked below 100 in the list of about 150 countries. In the report published by Mapinji Global Institute in April this year, it has been estimated that if the women of the country get equal opportunity in the economic sector, India's GDP will increase by 770 billion dollars or 18 percent. At present, women community in India has a participation of about 25 percent in the total labor force and the country's GDP. The contribution of women in the country is about 18 percent, which is the lowest in the world. In view of this, like the political leadership of women in local bodies provided earlier, under the leadership of the Honorable Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, through a historic constitutional amendment, one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies of the country have been reserved for women to empower their political leadership.³

4. Concept of Women Empowerment

In the last few decades, women have touched new heights of achievement in all fields including art, knowledge and science, sports, research, technology and medicine and public life. Today, there is no such field in India where women have not registered their presence.⁴ Women officers have been given permanent commission in the most advanced defense fields. Armed forces have opened admissions for women candidates in the National Defense Academy (NDA). More than 100 women have played an important role in successfully completing the Chandrayaan-3 mission. India has the highest number of women pilots in the world.⁵

Women empowerment has ensured a sense of self-power in women, ability to determine their own options, awareness of rights and equality and achievements to affect social change for themselves and others. In a broad sense, women empowerment is a holistic concept.

It includes allocation of adequate resources in all areas like health, nutrition, education, investment, planning, skill development and political participation and their active participation in the decision-making process. Empowerment also means active and continuous participation of women in power establishments. In fact, women should be objectively provided with such facilities with the help of which they can voluntarily develop their personality. Therefore, along with education, planning, economic resources, political participation and opportunity for political leadership at local, state and central level is inevitable for them. With this, they will be able to determine new parameters of progress and development with their creativity.⁶

For the progress, upliftment and modernization of women, it is necessary that they are empowered in every sphere of life, especially in politics, and their level of participation should be high. Only when this happens, an egalitarian society will be established on the basis of gender. Three basic principles can be considered essential for the political empowerment of women.

1. Equality between men and women
2. Right to full development of one's own potential
3. Women's right to take decisions regarding their own representatives and themselves

To bring about a change in gender relations based on inequality, it is necessary that women come forward to lead the main points of power and authority such as state, market and civil society in the current global socio-economic system. To get the plans and policies affecting them made in their favour, women will have to make their strong presence in the corridors of power and acquire such power that they can influence the decisions taken in their context.

5. Role of the Government

After independence till modernity, the legislature and governments have been working for the welfare of women through the constitution and amendments and as a result many schemes and laws have come into existence for them. Many provisions have been made for their benefit including Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956, Dowry Prohibition Act 1961, Stri Pratha (Niwaran) Act 1961, National Women Empowerment Act 2001, Domestic Violence Protection Act 2005.

Keeping in view the physical structure of women, continuity in creation and livelihood, special provisions have also been made for employed women. Keeping in view the problems related to women in India, National Commission for Women was constituted on 31 January 1992 under National Commission for Women Act, 1990. It is a constitutional body for protection, promotion and protection of their interests and legal rights. Many schemes and programmes including Jal Jeevan Mission, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, Swachh Bharat Mission, Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana exist for their benefit.

6. Local Self-Governance

Local self-governance is a system of governance in which an attempt is made to understand and resolve the problems of citizens by ensuring their participation in the administration at the local level. The system of local self-governance ensures democratic decentralization on one hand and paves the way for citizens to resolve their problems on their own on the other hand.

Panchayati Raj system is not new to India. Panchayats have existed in India since ancient times. It was continued even during the British period and many efforts were made to strengthen it. Recently, in 1992, Panchayats and Municipalities were given constitutional status by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments passed under the leadership of the then Prime Minister Shri Narasimha Rao. Through this, Panchayat bodies have been provided in the original Part 9 and Municipal bodies in Part 9A for local self-governance. Schedule 11 and Schedule 12 related to these have also been added.⁷

There is a provision in the Panchayat body that one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in each Panchayat are reserved for women. Similarly, in the urban local body also, under the Constitution Amendment Act, 1992, there is a provision that one-third of the seats to be filled on the basis of adult suffrage will be reserved for women. Their allocation will be done in rotation.

The participation of women in local bodies is now gradually turning from symbolic to reality.

Due to the participation in the local body, these women are now awakening the consciousness of rights and responsibilities and they are making their strong presence felt in this decentralized democratic system.

7. Nari Shakti Vandan Act

Women constitute half of the population of India. For the sustainable and egalitarian development of the country, it is essential to ensure their positive development and empowerment in a safe and protected environment. Feminization of governance and administration is very important to bring diversity, talent and insight. The presence of women in the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies is essential for rational discussions on public policy innovations such as gender budgeting.

The share of women MPs in the Lok Sabha has increased from 4 percent in 1952 to about 15 percent in 2019. Their situation is almost the same in the Upper House as well. The situation is worrying in the context of the states. Their representation is below 10 percent in about 19 states. This is much lower than the global average of 26 percent. However, as voters, their voting percentage is higher than that of men. In the 1962 Lok Sabha elections, the voting percentage of men and women was 62 and 46.6 percent respectively, but in the 2019 elections, the male and female voting percentage was 67 percent and 67.2 percent respectively.⁸

The government of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has tried to institutionalize the participation of women in public life at the highest level by bringing the Nari Shakti Vandan Act. This Act will reserve one-third seats for women in Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. It reflects the commitment of Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi towards gender equality and inclusiveness. It will promote women leadership and half of the nation's population will get representation in important decision making.¹⁰ With the dismal representation of women in the Parliament and State Assemblies of the country, this was pending for the last three decades. It was earlier introduced in the Parliament as a Bill in 1996, 1998, 2002, 2003 and 2010 but could not become an Act due to various political reasons and will and vested interests.

Apart from reserving one-third seats for women in Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, this Act also makes it mandatory that one-third of the seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes will be reserved for women of these categories. This Act was introduced in the Parliament as a Bill by Union Law and Justice Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal. During the discussion on this Constitution Amendment Bill (128th Amendment, later amended to 106th Amendment) in the Parliament, the Union Home Minister Shri Amit Shah said that after the 2024 general elections, the new government will conduct census and delimitation and it will be implemented by 2029.

8. Challenges

With a view to women empowerment, a historic step has been taken to extend the political leadership of women in local bodies to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies through the Nari Shakti Vandan Act. However, it still has a long way to go. The main challenges in this are as follows:-

1. It is still not clear how the seats will be decided, how they will be decided in rotation and what will happen in those states where there are less than three Lok Sabha seats.
2. Along with reserving seats in political leadership, the main challenge is how to bring positive changes in the society.
3. How to strengthen the decision making power of women for values like equality and harmony in the society.
4. It has been observed in various local bodies with reservation for women that the elected women Sarpanches are dominated by the male members of the family, especially their husbands. They are called 'Sarpanch Pati' or 'Parshad Pati' and they work in place of their elected wives. However, in the last few years, this proxy representation has declined to a great extent.
5. After 2026, the delimitation exercise may have to face many technical challenges. Especially from the southern states, which may have to lose some seats in the Lok Sabha in the delimitation exercise on the basis of population. It is feared that the southern states with less population will get fewer seats in the Lok Sabha than the northern states with more population. It is natural to raise the fear that how will the delimitation be completed on time.

9. Conclusion and Future

Resource management, infrastructure, production process, economic inequality, unequal participation in policy making and decision making process etc. are such basic problems, without which the goal of women empowerment is doubtful to be achieved. Although India is famous all over the world for its cultural identity and distinct identity. There is an ancient mantra of this culture - 'Na Devnam Na Palayanam' i.e. do not run away, change the world.

Women empowerment is not based on any personal progress but is essential for the creation of a peaceful, advanced, developed and prosperous society, nation and world. After all the efforts, it is visible that India's dream of a just, equitable, democratic and developed nation will definitely come true in the future.

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