WOMEN AND PARTICIPATION

PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Under the Jamun tree in my ancestral home, I nestled on my grandmother’s lap as she regaled me with stories full of myths and magic. Like any Indian child, I was brought up by my extended family of aunts and grandparents. I sat wide eyed as I listened to the value of the princess as she fought war for her kingdom and won it from the enemies. To upend a cliché, the princess with her courage and martial skills won the prince over. It was the story of Chitrangada that fascinated me, a woman equal to man - brave, beautiful and vivacious. Little did I know that such stories existed only in the myths and the glorious stories from the past. It was hard to find Chitrangada in the present day India where I lived.

Reality Check- The Insurmountable Barriers

“You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of women.”

Jawaharlal Nehru, First Prime Minister of India

Women hold up half the sky, but they do it standing on a ground that remains very rocky. Before we speak of women empowerment, we need to ask ourselves, why development that was focussed on women seems to have just passed them by. Globally, of the 1.3 billion poor, nearly 70% are women. Women also constitute 75-80% of the world’s refugees and two thirds of the world’s illiterate. The situation in my country is much worse. India holds the last position in the health and survival index and the world’s worst sex ratio. As the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen pointed out, 25 million girls are missing in India every year as they are not even allowed to be born! Almost 70% of women in rural India decide what to cook for the family; but they need permission from men to go out and spend their hard earned money. Such sexual stereotyping limit the role of woman to a glorified cook and domestic help and relegate them to a secondary position.

I believe India is a highly advanced civilisation in a state of decay. India unfurls in a series of paradoxes. The Indian woman is the victim of double prejudice- that of her gender and her caste. The traditional Indian society is ruled by the diktats of self proclaimed caste lords who are the guardians of the age old traditions. They have the legitimacy, authority and social sanction from the villages of India. The unwritten laws of caste are faithfully followed and the burden of honour invariably falls on the women. Such medieval notions of purity and chastity that plague my country are anti democratic and against the concept of human rights. It is in this context of social realities, that the barriers that Indian women face needs to be analysed.

The discrimination against the girl child begins from her birth. Boys are preferred over girls, hence female foeticide and selective abortions are common in the country. Despite the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technologies Act, India tops the list of illegal abortions, 90% of which were targeted to eliminate the girl child. The misery that pregnant women go through are heart wrenching. Only 42% child births are monitored by qualified professionals in India. That results in the death of 300 mothers everyday in the country. The ordeal that an Indian girl faces at birth is only the beginning of a life long struggle to be seen and heard.

Another crippling social reality is the existence of the barbaric practice of child marriages in my country. A UNICEF report suggests that 40% of the child marriages in the world happen
in India. Girls are pushed into a relation of which they do not have even the faintest knowledge. Almost half of Indian girls are married off before they are 18. The ill prepared girls enter a compassionless wedlock, become mothers and fade into oblivion. They are not given a chance to go to school, finish their education and dream a life for themselves. Once again a law is in place to restraint the custom, but our society is an enthusiastic participant in the deliberate perpetuation of this entrenched tradition.

People say that marriage is the celebration of love between two people. Women enter the holy portals of matrimony in boundless joy and nervous anticipation. For many of the women in my country, marriage could easily be their death warrant as well. Weddings are strictly arranged by the families and not the individuals concerned. Orthodox and puritanical beliefs dictate the most appropriate match be decided based on caste, birth and heredity. Bride price or dowry is an ancient Hindu custom integral to marital rites. What began as a woman inheriting her parent’s share of wealth has degenerated into a pernicious custom today. Extortion by the groom’s family has lead to the ruin of daughters and their family. Failure to pay the humungous bride price has lead to wife battering and bride burning. This deeper malaise has led the average family to believe that girls are financial burdens.

In my journey throughout my country, I have come across customs and traditions unique to my country. In a region in the south of India, there is a custom of Jogini. Girls from the lower castes are married off to the local deity in the village and she is expected to serve the village by granting sexual favours to men. It is nothing but glorified forced prostitution. Killing the newlywed bride if she marries out of caste is referred to as ‘honour killing.’ When I look at the life of an average Indian girl, I realise that her life is given to her as alms are given to beggars. She holds the begging bowl of her life and cherishes the little that others throw at her out of pity. Empowerment for an Indian girl would begin with holding her head high and walking up the ladder of life facing the walls as they come. The family, community and society are all quintessential factors in an Indian’s life. There is a glaring discrepancy between the laws and social reality. It is in this social context that empowerment for women has to be defined for India. Unique circumstances call for unique solutions.

What does empowerment mean for a woman?

‘Cut not the wings of your dreams for they are the heartbeat and freedom of your souls.’

The words that I hear so often when problems of women are discussed are gender equality, women emancipation and empowerment. Everyone thinks that a cocktail of the three would be the perfect antidote against the myriads of problems women face. Such ‘one-size-for-all’ solutions are bound to be ineffective and sometimes counterproductive. Before discussing the shortcomings, we have to look at what we understand by these terms.

- **Gender Equality**- UNICEF defines the goal of gender equality as ‘a level playing field for girls and women by ensuring that all children have equal opportunity to develop their talents.’ It is primarily a matter of human rights and right to equality.

- **Emancipation**- Emancipation of a group takes place when efforts are spared for a disenfranchised group to obtain rights. In our case, emancipation of women will be the first step towards empowerment.
Empowerment- Empowerment is the power within to articulate, power to develop skills, power with which collective action is made possible and the power over changing underlying inequalities. It is the social, political, economic and spiritual strength of an individual, the confidence in developing her capabilities and the realisation that power can change.

Gender Equality is our goal and empowerment of women is the only way to attain it. Women are half of humanity and leaving them out completely, we cannot hope to move forward. By arresting and denying job growth for women, the Asia pacific region is losing $42.46 billion a year. The price of neglecting women is very high. That is why the United Nations adopted Women Empowerment as The Millennium Development Goal 3. The UNDP has come up with a Gender Empowerment Measure and a number of International conferences have ratified women empowerment as their goal. The components of Gender Empowerment Measure are

- Economic Participation and opportunities- This involves participation, remuneration, advancement in work and equality of income.
- Educational Attainment- through improved literacy rate and enrolment ratio
- Political participation- measured by the number of women ministers in The Parliament
- Health and Survival- measured with life expectancy and sex ratio.

There is a problem with this measurement of empowerment. Just like the GDP of a country in no way indicates its actual prosperity vis-a-vis equitable distribution, Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) defined above will not measure the capacity building of the bucolic Indian woman. GEM is a composite measure and an aggregate index. Its limitation is that it does not capture the multidimensional view of empowerment. In the case of India, it is necessary to add an individualised component representing a woman’s autonomy, decision making power and authority as she faces her family and a patriarchal society that resists her authority.

My Vision of Women Empowerment

Women empowerment according to me is the ability of a woman to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to her. The intuitive idea behind such a definition is her well being. I have constructed my vision from the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen’s Theory of Human Capabilities. It is this concept that brought together a range of ideas that inspired the creation of the Human Development Index. Instead of utilities, the emphasis here is on capabilities. All human capabilities are practical choices. It can be denied or suppressed by external factors. It is in realising this capability to the full potential that a human being is truly emancipated. Behaviour analysts speak of self efficacy as a determinant of whether an individual will undertake new behaviour such as empowerment. A person’s self expectation determines whether or not empowerment will take place, the extent of effort expended and persistence in the face of challenges. Thus efficacy beliefs serve as barriers of change in one’s own empowerment.
My vision of Women’s Emancipation entails the following Rights

- **Right to life** - to have self-confidence to articulate and assert, power to negotiate and decide.

- **Right to bodily health and integrity** - to have a sense of ownership of one’s body, the right to adequate nourishment, opportunities for sexual satisfaction and choices in matters of sexual relation and reproduction.

- **Right to fullness of personality and identity** - a woman is a being with senses, imagination and thoughts; she should be able to express them freely. Her emotional development should not be blighted due to fear or anxiety. She should have the freedom to critically reflect and have the liberty of conscience.

- **Right to Association** - to be able to affiliate in collective action, associate in social interaction, to have friendships and non-humiliation while she enjoys her freedom to associate.

**Integrated Approach to Empower Women**

Economic empowerment is the first step towards political empowerment and beyond. This is because women work for long hours and remain unpaid and invisible. 94% of women workers in India are in the informal sector. In India, women collect water and firewood and perform all household tasks from food preparation to care giving. As their work is not credited in the National Accounts, they obtain lower entitlements and less access to resources. The vicious circle of long hours of work, less exposure, less income and less leisure grapples a woman’s life. Though men and women face poverty, they both experience and respond to it differently. Economic empowerment should enable women to take greater financial risks, greater standards of development and more access to resources; it is not merely a marginal increase in income. However, if economic empowerment has to translate into substantial change in power relations, then socio-political empowerment should take place simultaneously. I can illustrate the case of India where Self Help Groups (SHGs) of women was a harbinger of economic empowerment and subsequently political empowerment.

**The Idea of Self Help Group—Women as Entrepreneurs**

Self Help Groups (SHGs) are dialogic small groups of women that provide easy access to microcredit, subsidy and develop collective consciousness. I was able to monitor the working of such a group at close quarters in my country. Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) is one such example. What began as a trade union has now grown into a member driven institution. SEWA works on the Gandhian Philosophy of self-reliance as the second freedom.
SEWA provides

- **Trade facilitation centres** – SEWA permits business enterprise by women artisans thereby ensuring socio-economic security and full employment. Thus women are not forced to migrate in search of work. They do not have to work with middlemen who usurp a portion of the revenue. They can access their clients directly. Thus through an integrated supply chain mechanism they have an organised production.

- **Vocational Training** – 44% of the women who come to SEWA are illiterate. They receive little opportunity to receive skills and develop entrepreneurship otherwise. Vocational training is given by the project ‘Svavlambhan’ in association with the European Union. It is a project to train 25000 women in agro processing, textiles and garments. Agriculture, renewable energy and sustainable livelihood.

- **Easy access to Micro Credit**- A number of loans are given to start up business and savings is encouraged.

- **Market Linkages**- SEWA’s rural resource training centre permits women to work in supply chain as producers, value adders and trainers thereby creating a multiplier effect.

Thus SHGs offer a unique approach to financial intermediation by linking themselves to wider development programmes. There is a synergy between SHGs and local politics. Personal determination, effective guidance and mutual support among women have made them active in the village affairs. They stand for the local elections and once in power, take action on their community issues. There is a new boldness and confidence in standing upto the patriarchal society, putting pressure on the authorities and taking a stand on issues of social justice like preventing domestic violence and alcoholism among men.

Economic Empowerment is possible only through wealth creation through wageful employment and entrepreneurship. To alleviate poverty and attain financial sustainability, easy access to credit is a must. Realisation of gendered poverty and ushering in gender sensitive budgeting is the need of the hour. Empowerment also encompasses woman’s socio-political role. To reduce vulnerability and fight discrimination, increased role in participatory governance is the only way out. With the Panchayati Raj Institutions reserving 33% seats for women, the potential for political emancipation is huge. This led me to devise my own viable programme for women empowerment in India.

**Jaago Nari Project**

I name my project ‘Jaago Nari’13. The objective of my project is women empowerment through an inclusive National Agenda and
participation of Youth. The deadline for achieving the goals is the year 2020. The components of my project are

- **Inclusive National Agenda**

  *Economic and Public Policy*- We need an economic and public policy that is gender sensitive. Presently only 10 governmental departments hold targeted programmes for women. This has to change. 30% of budget allotted have to go to women centred projects. Gender auditing must be made compulsory to ensure compliance. Gender resource centres have to be established in every state that studies Gender Development Index. The concept of work must be redefined and women friendly personnel policies must be adopted.

  *Legal Framework*- Registration of marriage should be made compulsory. Personal laws relating to marriage, divorce, maintenance and guardianship should be implemented whenever a woman is harassed over the issues. A special law should be there to deal with crime against women like acid attack. Presently, the Indian Penal Code does not have a provision to distinguish heinous crime separately and award stringent punishment. Women police stations should be encouraged to take up cases of women victims and witnesses.

  *Public Policy*- Right to Education has become a fundamental right of every India. Special incentives should be given to the families of girls to keep them in school. For instance, a nominal sum can be deposited in a girl’s name by the government when she is born. She must be entitled to encash it when she becomes 18 and remains unmarried till then. This amount can be used by her for her future. Affordable healthcare facilities and family planning measures should be accessible to every girl and woman.

- **Programme for Youth**

  The Government alone cannot change the present situation with the sweep of a magic wand. Commitment from the people especially the youth should be there to make it a grand success. The youth can lend their hand in three capacities – Campaigning, monitoring and volunteering for the cause. The young men and women can identify and commit resources for the successful implementation of the programme. They are responsible for the implementation of the social transformation that takes place in the hearts and minds of people. They can take up street plays, skits, seminars and other educational ventures in their neighbourhood for the cause. The youth must also monitor the government policies coming under the
programme. Effective measures like The RTI Act\textsuperscript{14} and PILs\textsuperscript{15} can be used to ensure transparency and compliance. The youth in the country are uniquely placed to do the ground work like publicity and put pressure on the authorities through collective action.

**Conclusion- Waiting for a Renaissance**

There is a no better time to deal with the issue of women and participation. We cannot neglect half of humanity and hope to solve the looming crises like unemployment, financial crisis, and climate change. Gender parity has become a compelling necessity. India appears to be in the throes of pseudo modernism- on the one side there is blind consumerism and westernisation; on the other there are deep rooted feudal values that go in the name of tradition. We have to go a long way before the laws of the land and the social reality are on the same page. We need a social reform movement to bring ‘medieval India’ to the modern. Justice to women is long overdue; what is morally right cannot be politically wrong. We are waiting for another renaissance.

**NOTES**

1. Jamun is the Hindi word for Java Plum Tree, which is commonly found in India.
2. Chitrangada is a warrior Princess of the Kingdom of Manipur, described in the Indian Epic Mahabharata.
6. Caste is a combined social system of occupation, endogamy, social class and political power. Religion in India is dissected by castes that define the social identity of an individual.
7. Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technologies Act, 1994, identifies sex determination as a punishable offence with 3 years imprisonment or a fine upto INR 10000.
10. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the sum total of goods and services produced in a country in a year. It measures the output of a Nation’s Economy.
12. www.sewa.org
14. Right to Information Act (RTI), 2005, is an initiative taken by the Government of India that mandates timely response for citizen’s queries on government decisions and authorities under the Central and State governments of India.
15. Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in Indian Law means litigation for public interest. It may be initiated in any Indian court by the court itself or any other party other than the aggrieved party. It is a symbol of Judicial Activism in India.
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