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Women's Empowerment and Security Mechanism in 21ˢᵗ Centuary Present Indian Scenario

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Abstract

Women's empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include geographical location (urban/rural), educational status, social status (caste and class), and age. Policies on women's empowerment exist at the national, state, and local (Panchayat) levels in many sectors, including health, education, economic opportunities, gender-based violence, and political participation. However, there are significant gaps between policy advancements and actual practice at the community level. Women Empowerment itself elaborates that Social Rights, Political Rights, Economical stability, judicial strength and all other rights should be also equal to women. There should be no discrimination between men and woman. Women should now there fundamental and social rights which they get once they born.

* There should be respect and dignity towards Women.
* Have total independences of their own life and lifestyle inside the home and also outside at their work.
* They should make there decision, by there own choice.
* They should have a high social respect in society.
* They have equal rights in society and other judicial works.
* They should not be discriminated while providing any type of education.
* They should select there own economic and financial choices by there own.
* There should not be any discrimination between woman and man while giving jobs and employment.
* They should have safe and secured Working location with proper privacy.

Keywords: Empowerment, Panchayat, Social Rights, education

Women empowerment means emancipation of women from the vicious grips of social, economical, political, caste and gender-based discrimination. It means granting women the freedom to make life choices. Women empowerment does not mean 'deifying women' rather it means replacing patriarchy with parity. In this regard, there are various facets of women empowerment, such as given hereunder:

Human Rights or Individual Rights: A woman is a being with senses, imagination and thoughts; she should be able to express them freely. Individual empowerment means to have self-confidence to articulate and assert power to negotiate and decide.

Historical Background

There is no denying the fact that women in India have made a considerable progress in almost seven decades of Independence, but they still have to struggle against many handicaps and social evils in the male-dominated society. Many evil and masculine forces still prevail in the modern Indian society that resists the forward march of its women folk. It is ironical that a country, which has recently acclaimed the status of the first Asian country to accomplish its Mars mission in the maiden attempt, is positioned at the 29th rank among 146 countries across the globe on the basis of Gender Inequality Index. There has been amelioration in the position of women, but their true empowerment is still awaited.

Swami Vivekananda, one of the greatest sons of India, quoted that, *"There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved, It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing."* Therefore, inclusion of "Women Empowerment' as one of the prime goals in the eight Millennium Development Goals underscores the relevance of this fact. Thus, in order to achieve the status of a developed country, India needs to transform its colossal women force into an effective human resource and this is possible only through the empowerment of women.

One key factor for the gap in implementation of laws and policies[1] to address discrimination, economic disadvantages, and violence against women at the community level is the largely patriarchal structure that governs the community and households in much of India. As such, women and girls have restricted mobility, access to education, access to health facilities, and lower decision-making power, and experience higher rates of violence. Political participation is also hindered at the Panchayat (local governing bodies) level and at the state and national levels, despite existing reservations for women.[2]

The impact of the patriarchal structure can be seen in rural and urban India, although women's empowerment in rural India is much less visible than in urban areas. This is of particular concern, since much of India is rural despite the high rate of urbanization and expansion of cities. Rural women, as opposed to women in urban settings, face inequality at much higher rates, and in all spheres of life. Urban women and, in particular, urban educated women enjoy relatively higher access to economic opportunities, health and education, and experience less domestic violence. Women (both urban and rural) who have some level of education have higher decision-making power in the household and the community. Furthermore, the level of women's education also has a direct implication on maternal mortality rates, and nutrition and health indicators among children.

Employment status of women according to a brochure on the status of women. "women do more than 67% of the total hours of work done in the world but they earn only 10% of the world's income and own only 1% of the world's property. In India, women are often refferd to as the secondary earner in the family. It is generally believed that unlike for men, a professional career is not a must for women. Though the government claims to be doing a lot for the upliftment and empowerment of women, data on women's employment reveals that there is a long way to go.

Among rural women, there are further divisions that hinder women's empowerment. The most notable ones are education levels and caste and class divisions. Women from lower castes (the scheduled castes,

other backward castes, and tribal communities) are particularly vulnerable to maternal mortality and infant mortality. They are often unable to access health and educational services, lack decision-making power, and face higher levels of violence. Among women of lower caste and class, some level of education has shown to have a positive impact on women's empowerment indicators.[4]

Social divisions among urban women also have a similar impact on empowerment indicators. Upper class and educated women have better access to health, education, and economic opportunities, whereas lower class, less educated women in urban settings enjoy these rights significantly less. Due to rapid urbanisation and lack of economic opportunities in other parts of the country, cities also house sprawling slum areas. Slums are informal sprawls, and most times lack basic services such as clean water, sanitation, and health facilities. Additionally, slum dwellers mostly work in unorganized and informal sectors, making them vulnerable to raids by the state, abuse by employers, and other forms of insecurity. Women and children in slums are among the most vulnerable to violence and abuse, and are deprived of their basic human rights.

As a result of a vibrant women's movement in the last 50 years, policies to advance human rights for women in India are substantial and forward-thinking, such as the Domestic Violence Act (2005), and the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution that provide reservations for women to enter politics at the Panchayat level. There are multiple national and state level governmental and non-governmental mechanisms such as the Women's Commission to advance these policies, and the implementation of these policies is decentralized to state and district-level authorities and organizations that include local non-governmental organizations.

The policy/practice gap in India cuts across all sectors and initiatives as a result of rampant corruption and lack of good governance practices. State-level governments claim a lack of resources, and the resources they do receive are highly susceptible to corruption. Financial corruption hinders the government's ability to invest in social capital, including initiatives to advance women's empowerment. Since the 1990's India has put in place processes and legislative acts such as the Right to Information Act (2005) for information disclosure to increase transparency and hold government officials accountable. Mistrust of political institutions and leaders remains high in the society with corruption and graft allegations often covering media headlines.[5]

In addition to corruption and inadequate resources for implementation of initiatives at the community level, women's empowerment in India is negatively impacted by the pervasive discrimination of women in the family and the community. Discrimination against women in most parts of India (particularly the north) emerges from the social and religious construct of women's role and their status. As such, in many parts of India, women are considered to be less than men, occupying a lower status in the family and community, which consequentially restricts equal opportunity in women and girls' access to education, economic possibilities, and mobility.

Discrimination also limits women's choices and freedom. These choices are further dependent on structural factors like caste and class.

Empowerment for women in India requires a crosscutting approach and one which addresses the diversity of social structures that govern women's lives.

Political Women Empowerment: It means existence of a political system favouring the participation in and control by the women of the political decision-making process and in governance.

Identity politics in India is a very critical political instrument, which is both used and abused throughout political and social institutions. There are numerous social movements fighting for the rights of the marginalized, such as the Dalit rights movement, the tribal rights movement, etc. These movements have achieved many gains in assuring representation of the traditionally marginalized communities into mainstream society. Women's rights within these movements are largely unarticulated and thus reinforce inequalities within the very structures from which they are demanding inclusion. Empowerment approaches for women therefore is not only about providing services, but also about recognizing their lived realities of multiple layers of discrimination that hinder their access to services.

Similarly, access to education for girls in some of the northern states like Uttar Pradesh and Punjab does not only rely on proximity of schools. Access to education is part of a larger structural concern, including the practice of son preference, which creates inherent discriminatory practices. Education initiatives therefore cannot rely solely on building educational infrastructure, but also need to address some of the root causes of discrimination against women and girls which affect the decisions made by parents.

Women's security, decision-making power, and mobility are three indicators for women's empowerment. In India, and more so for rural and less educated women, these three indicators are significantly low. Data from the NFHS-3 survey on women's decision-making power shows that only about one third of the women interviewed took decisions on their own regarding household issues and their health. Decision-making power among employed urban women was higher than among rural and less educated women. The survey also found that older married women had more decision-making power than the younger married women. Younger women and girls experience an additional layer of discrimination as a result of their age.

Data on women's mobility in India indicates the lack of choices women have, and that urban and educated women have more mobility choices than rural women. The data shows that about half the women interviewed had the freedom to go to the market or a health facility alone. Seventy-nine percent of urban women from the highest education brackets and only about 40 percent of rural women without education were allowed to go to the market alone.

Mobility restrictions for women are dependent upon how the family and community view women's rights. They also, however, are intrinsically dependent on the prevailing levels of violence against women in the household and the community. Abuse and violence towards women is predominantly perpetrated within the household, and marital violence is among the most accepted by both men and women. Wife beating, slapping, rape, dowry related deaths, feudal violence towards tribal and lower caste women, trafficking, sexual abuse, and street violence permeate the Indian social fabric, and create one of the most serious obstacles in achieving women's empowerment.

The gap in policy and practice in women's empowerment is most visible when it comes to the level and kinds of violence women face in India. Despite the policies, laws[6], and initiatives by civil society institutions, violence against women in India is widespread and the consequences for perpetrators rarely match the crime. Enforcement of laws and sentencing of perpetrators are long and arduous processes, and the gaps in these processes are further widened by corruption.

Another gap in implementing laws and policies on violence against women is the inaccessibility of information on victims' rights among rural and less educated women. Additionally, social stigma and the fear of abandonment by the family play a big role in women and girls' ability or inability to access laws and policies to address sexual and physical violence.

Policies relating to women's rights have had a positive trajectory in the past few decades with the central government articulating many progressive measures to advance gender equality in social, economic, and political arenas. The Government of India (GoI) has two main bodies to advance gender equality: the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the National Commission for Women, which is an autonomous organization under the Ministry of Women and Child Development.[7] Both bodies work on national- and state-level legal and social policies to advance gender equality. The Ministry has widely implemented local-level micro-finance schemes to advance economic opportunities for rural women. The National Commission for Women has been instrumental in creating legislative changes, and has set up Complaint and Investigate Cells at the state level. The Grievance Cells receive complaints of gender-based violence and are mandated to investigate, provide referrals and counselling, and ultimately report on such cases.[8]

With a vibrant women's rights movement in India, there are continuous demands for better laws, provisions, and accountability for implementation. Most recent examples include the change in India's rape laws, where in 2006 marital rape was recognized. Currently, women's rights activists are demanding better provisions in Sections 375 and 376 of the Indian Penal Code. Since then, there have been multiple challenges by the women's movement leading to small but significant amendments [9]. The 2005 Domestic Violence Act provides protection from violence in the household from not only male perpetrators, but also female perpetrators like mothers-in-law and other female members in extended families.

There also have been gains in women's inheritance rights, yet challenges remain in implementation. Social biases and lack of enforcement continue to hinder the full realization of Indian inheritance laws. Inheritance laws and property distribution fall under the Hindu and Muslim personal laws, both of which exempt agricultural land. [10] For a country with a predominantly agro-based economy, women's inability to inherit agricultural land exacerbates feminization of poverty and neglects women's welfare.[11]

Like all other spheres of social change in India, there is an undeniable gap between policy and practice. More notably, the deeply entrenched social hierarchies based on class, caste, ethnic, and communal divisions leave many communities on the margins with little knowledge of their rights and even less protection from local, state, and national governmental policies.

Inequality between men and women runs across the board, including in education, economic opportunities, representation in governance, and other state and private institutions. Additionally, women in India face high rates of violence. Some recent statistics on women include:

- India ranks 18th among the highest maternal mortality rates in the world with 540 deaths for every 100,000 births[12]
- Only 48% of adult Indian women are literate[13]
- Among rural women, 36.1% have experienced physical violence in their adult lives[14]
- 66% of women who have experienced physical violence in their lifetimes are divorced, widowed, or deserted [15]
- Lower caste and tribal women are among those who experience the highest levels of physical violence
- 85.3% of women reporting violence claimed that their current husbands were the perpetrators[16]

- ◆ According to the most recent Demographic and Health Survey analysis, only 43% of currently married women (between ages 15-49) are employed as compared to 99% of men[17]

Women's Security

The multiple forms of violence experienced in the household, at the community level, and in some instances by the state, threaten women's security in India. In many parts of North India son preference is a widely practiced phenomenon. Son preference has direct linkages to sex-selective abortion (illegal across India; however, enforcement by both police and some doctors is still lacking), and discrimination of girl children in access to health, nutrition, and education. Research conducted by the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) found that, although not universal, particularly in households where there is more than one daughter there are significant differences in nutrition and health levels between male and female children. [18]

Additionally, at the household level, incest, rape and domestic violence continue to hinder women's development across India. Forty percent of all sexual abuse cases in India are incest, and 94% of the incest cases had a known member of the household as the perpetrator.[19]

Dowry related deaths, domestic violence, gang rape of lower caste women by upper caste men, and physical violence by the police towards tribal women all contribute to women's insecurity in India. The class and caste structure inadvertently put poor women from lower class and tribal communities at the most risk of violence. Class and caste divisions also create grave challenges to poor, lower caste, and tribal women in accessing justice and retribution as victims and survivors of violence.

Women and girls in urban India are also at high risk of gender-based violence. In Delhi, the country's capital, a scan of daily newspapers reveals shocking numbers of cases of violence against women. The National Crime Bureau claims that a woman is raped every 29 minutes in Delhi. Street violence in urban centres is a growing concern for young women and girls, who are increasingly moving away from rural areas for economic opportunities and higher education. Particularly women and girls from the northeast region of India living in urban centres such as Delhi have reported experiencing social discrimination and marginalization, and many times physical violence. In 2005, according to the North East Support Centre, among the 100,000 people from the northeast living in Delhi 86% had reported racial discrimination and 41% of cases were sexual abuse cases.[20]

The northeast states of India are a volatile region, with a number of active insurgencies. The GoI has continuously deployed state troops to fight the insurgents, who predominantly follow the Maoist ideology. This region, because of its physical and cultural proximity to Myanmar, China, and Bhutan, has for the most part been ignored by the central government, thereby fuelling the insurgents' demand for development and autonomy. In the northeast (as in most conflict-ridden regions) women bear the brunt of war from both sides. There have been numerous instances of violence perpetrated by state security forces against local and tribal women.[21]

Trafficking of Women and Girls

India is both a source and destination for trafficked women and girls into prostitution and bonded labour. While exact numbers of trafficked women and girls are difficult to ascertain, there have been figures projected by various national and international NGOs.[22] Anti -trafficking measures in India have

increased with India's commitment to international human rights protocols, and through strict legal provisions at the national level. The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act 1956 (ITPA) is the widely used law to prosecute traffickers, but also is invoked to target prostitution.

Sex work is a debated subject in the women's movement in India. The anti-prostitution law is seen by many to criminalize and further marginalize women who are in the sex trade. Women's rights organizations, activists, and organizations such as the Durbar Mahila Samanway Committee[23] (a nationwide sex workers' collective) have long supported legalization of the sex trade in India. The debate over legalization of sex work continues today and sex-work supporters are lobbying to change the ITPA for better rehabilitation measures for those who have been rescued during brothel and street raids. The ITPA also does not give adequate measures for those who are trafficked for purposes other than sex work[24], and disproportionately targets women, making them further vulnerable to poverty and exploitation.

Economical and occupational empowerment: It implies a better quality of material life through sustainable livelihoods owned and managed by women. It means reducing their financial dependence on their male counterparts by making them a significant part of human resource.

India is one of the world's fastest growing economies, with women mainly from the middle class increasingly entering the workforce. Urban centers like Delhi and Bangalore have seen an influx of young women from semi- urban and rural parts of the country, living alone and redefining themselves.[25] However, the story of economic empowerment for women is not a singular narrative; rather it is located in a complex set of caste, class, religious, and ethnic identities.

The Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum in 2009 ranked India 114th out of 134 countries for inequality between men and women in the economy, politics, health, and education.[26] On equal economic opportunities and women's participation in the labour force, India ranked 127th and 122nd respectively.[27] The number of women in the workforce varies greatly from state to state: 21% in Delhi; 23% in Punjab; 65% in Manipur; 71% Chhattisgarh; 76% in Arunachal Pradesh. [28] The diversity of women's economic opportunities between states is due to the cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity of each state. Northern states like Delhi and Punjab lag far behind on gender equality measures, including the alarming sex ratio between men and women (due to son preference and sex-selective abortion), low female literacy levels, and high rates of gender-based violence.

In rural India, women's economic opportunities remain restricted by social, cultural, and religious barriers. Most notably inheritance laws embedded in Hindu and Shariat civil codes continue to marginalize women in the household and the larger community. Rural women, particularly of lower caste and class, have the lowest literacy rates, and therefore do not have the capacity to negotiate pay or contracts and most often engage in the unorganized sector, self-employment, or in small scale industry. Self-help groups (SHGs) are a widely practiced model for social and economic mobility by NGOs and the government. SHGs provide women with the opportunity to manage loans and savings that can be used by members for varying needs. SHGs also are used to promote social change among the members and the community at large. Members of SHGs have used their experiences as leverage to enter other local institutions such as the Panchayat Khap.[29]

Rural, low caste, and tribal women also make up 70% of domestic workers in India, a sector which is largely unregulated and unorganized. India's growing economy has allowed for many upper and middle-class women to enter the workforce, and while poor rural women have little access to education and training, there is a high demand for domestic workers in urban hubs.

Women's economic opportunity in India is a rapidly changing landscape. Women are increasingly entering the workforce— particularly women professionals—and are creating change, but there remains a large number of invisible women workers in unorganized and volatile sectors. However, organizing at the local level, albeit small, is widespread. Implementation of national and state level policies lags behind in ensuring that women workers have equal pay and are free from exploitation.

Social Women Empowerment: A critical aspect of social empowerment of women is promotion of gender equality. Gender equality implies a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life.

Women are educated about the social benefits including awareness about the existing social problems in the society, good recognition & image in the family & community, role in making important decision in their family, plan & promote better education for their children, taking care of health of the aged and the children just to mention a few. Women are also allowed to participate in political and public life. Therefore, they are given a chance to serve the community including fighting for the basics amenities & welfare needs of the village community such as: Safe drinking water Public sanitation Street light Chance to help the weaker people like disable and the aged.

Domestic workers are mostly illiterate, with little or no negotiating power for wage equity, and are highly vulnerable to exploitation and sexual and physical abuse.[30]

There is a movement at the policy level to organize domestic workers and to create laws to regulate minimum wage, working hours, and other measures such as life and health insurance. Currently a national-level Taskforce on Domestic Workers has been formed that will present recommendations to the central government on better enforcement of rights for the many undocumented domestic workers in India.[31]

Women are also very visible in the construction sector in India, and like domestic workers are largely unorganized and rely on daily wagers. Women construction workers are mostly poor and illiterate and have little negotiating power. This sector is also unregulated and highly vulnerable to exploitation. Women workers also earn significantly less than men, although women are the ones who do most of the backbreaking work like carrying bricks and other heavy materials on site.[32]

On the other end of the spectrum, while India has one of the highest percentages of professional women in the world, those who occupy managerial positions are under 3%.[33] Most women work in low administrative positions, and many of the young women migrating to urban centres mostly work in service and retail industries, although more and more women are entering the IT and other technical sectors.[34]

The movement to assure women's economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR) as basic human rights is just emerging in India. The movement aims to locate women's rights within the larger human rights framework, and by doing so moves away from looking at women's issues only within the framework of violence against women and reproductive rights. ESCR attempts to look at the broader issues facing women, namely poverty, housing, unemployment, education, water, food security, trade, etc.

While the human rights movement on ESCR is largely contained at the international policy level, there are emerging social movements around the world. In the Indian context, projects like the Programme on Women's Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (PWESCR), for example, is creating linkages between the international human rights movement and the local articulation of women's rights. PWESCR aims to build a women's rights movement in India that creates equality in all spheres of women's lives. By empowering women economically and socially, ESCR provides for a broader discourse on rights that

moves women's rights from a victim-centered approach to one that cuts across other fundamental human rights issues.

Position of Women in India: The position enjoyed by women in the Rig- Vedic period deteriorated in the later Vedic civilization. Women were denied the right to education and widow remarriage. They were denied the right of inheritance and ownership of property. Many social evils like child marriage and dowry system surfaced and started to engulf women. During Gupta period, the status of women immensely deteriorated. Dowry became an institution and Sati Pratha became prominent.

During the British Raj, many social reformers such as Raja Rammohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Jyotirao Phule started agitations for the empowerment of women. Their efforts led to abolition of Sati and formulation of the Widow Remarriage Act. Later, stalwarts like Mahatma Gandhi and Pt. Nehru advocated women rights. As a result of their concentrated efforts the status of women in social, economical and political life began to elevate in the Indian society.

Current Scenario on Women Empowerment: Based on the ideas championed by our founding fathers for women empowerment, many social, economic and political provisions were incorporated in the Indian Constitution. Women in India now participate in areas such as education, sports, politics, media, art and culture, service sector and science and technology. But due to the deep- rooted patriarchal mentality in the Indian society, women are still victimised, humiliated, tortured and exploited. Even after almost seven decades of Independence, women are still subjected to discrimination in social, economic and educational field.

Political Empowerment

During the independence movement, women were visible and active as nationalists, and as symbols of "Mother India". Gandhi, in particular, was instrumental in creating space for women through his non-violence (and some would argue feminized) mode of protest.[35] Gandhi's legendary salt march [36] initially excluded women, but due to demands from women nationalists he later realized the power of women organizers at the local level. His inclusion of women, however, was not located within a gender equality framework, but was a means to achieving a stronger and unified Indian state. The inclusion of women in the nationalist movement was also to debunk the British colonial assertion of "needing to save the poor, vulnerable women" of pre-independence India.

As in many nationalist movements, women in India took part in the struggle, in turn propelling a women's rights movement. And, as seen historically in many post-colonial countries, the nationalist women's movement in India was confronted by the rebuilding of a patriarchal nationalist state. Women revolutionaries gave way to their male counterparts who (as a result of Partition politics) created a strong, male, and Hindu "New India".

The first post- independence Lok Sabha (the People's Council or the Parliament) had 4.4% women.[37] The period between the early 1940's and late 1970's saw an emergence of the Indian women's movement, but it was not until the 1980s that the women's movement gained real momentum.

Reservation at the Panchayat Level

In 1976 the Committee on the Status of Women in India was established and published a report recommending an increase in elected women at the grassroots level, which led to the introduction of

the 33.3% reservation at the Panchayat level in 1988. It was only in 1993 that an amendment in the constitution made the proposed reservation at the Panchayat (village level governing councils) a reality.[38]

In the last two decades since the reservation for women in elected Panchayats was passed, many studies have been conducted to look at the impact of this policy. A survey conducted in 2008 yielded that women made up close to 50% of all the village councils across the India.[39] The number of women representatives has certainly increased at the grassroots level; however, questions still remain regarding their decision-making power within the councils. A study in West Bengal and Rajasthan by the Institute of Management Studies (Calcutta) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) found that where women Panchayat members were active, there were more robust programs on water, irrigation, and infrastructure. The study conclusively states that in Panchayats where women were present policies were more beneficial to the community than in Panchayats where women were absent. A study by The Accountability Initiative also states that in Panchayats with female presidents, the participation of women in the larger council rose close to 3% in one year.[40] The reason for the increase in women's participation is correlated to two possible factors: first, women representatives exemplified new possibilities for change; and second, women leaders took up issues that would have a positive impact on the community as a whole.

Caste and Class Politics

The complexities of politics in India are embedded in class, caste, and religious identities. An analysis by International Idea of women in the Indian Parliament between 1991 and 1996 found that among the small number of women Parliamentarians, a disproportionate number represented the Brahmin caste (the higher caste in the Hindu caste system).[41] Most local governments remain largely patriarchal and caste-based institutions, hindering inclusive governance.[42] Furthermore, social mobility remains a privilege of members of higher classes and caste, although this is dramatically changing as a result of reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in politics and education.

For women politicians, class, age, and caste all have significant impact in their political lives. India is one of the few countries in the world that has elected a woman leader. Indira Gandhi was among the very few women leaders in the world during her time in office. However, her role as the Prime Minister was not seen as a win for the women's movement in India. She was the granddaughter of Jawaharlal Nehru and represented the political dynasty of her family. Additionally, her controversial political moves during the declared period of Emergency (1975-1977) suppressed dissent, forcing many of the radical women's rights movements to go underground.[43] In 2007 India elected its first female President, Ms. Pratibha Patil. While the President holds a mostly ceremonial role in Indian politics, Ms. Patil's election was deemed a symbolic move towards a more equitable representation of women at the highest levels of government.

Although representation of women and members of the lower castes in Indian politics is rapidly changing, complexities of caste politics continue to govern representation. An interesting case study is that of Mayawati, the Chief Minister of Utter Pradesh. Mayawati, a woman and a member of the Dalit caste, was the youngest Chief Minister when first elected, and the only woman Dalit to be elected as a Chief Minister. Although Mayawati represents transcendence of India's caste system, her political career is regrettably tainted with corruption charges, extravagant spending, and little positive impact on the realities of caste and class barriers for men and women in her State.

33% Reservation for Women

The Women's Bill in April 2010, which gives 33.3% reservation for women in all levels of Indian politics, took 14 years after its introduction to finally pass by the Rajya Sabha (the upper house of parliament). It is yet to be passed by the Lok Sabha (the lower house of parliament). The reservation bill will ensure 181 out of the 543 seats at the Parliament level, and 1,370 seats out of the 4,109 seats at the State Assembly level.[44] This is a historic move in the Indian political landscape, as currently women occupy less than 10% of seats in the national Parliament.[45]

The Women's Bill will also significantly change the demographics of class and caste among women politicians in leadership positions in the Indian political structure. It will create a path for women from lower classes and castes (who are currently confined to local-level governance) to enter state and national level governments. In addition to the existing reservations for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, one third of the SC and ST candidates must be women. Other Backward Class (OBC) members are not included in the reservation due to the wide disagreement about who constitutes OBC and a lack of existing data on the OBC population.

The two main arguments against the bill are that it will only benefit elite women (particularly in national level politics) and that there should be reservations for Dalit, minorities (particularly Muslim women), and OBCs. However, supporters of the bill do not agree with creating quotas within the existing 33% women quota in parliament, as SC and ST quotas already exist.

The bill mandates that all political parties reserve one third of their electoral ticket for women, including in the already mandated reservations for SC and STs. This will inadvertently create spaces for lower caste and class women to enter state and national level politics. The passage and implementation of the Women's Bill, and its impact on the existing gender, class, and caste barriers, is yet to be realized, but one thing is clear: India's politics is moving closer to equitable inclusion than ever before.

Conclusion

Women empowerment is one of the momentous issues of contemporary development policies in developingcountries. A woman is different by nature yet this difference does not mean inferiority. The empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerned in the 21st century not only at thenational level but also at an international level. Women constitute about 46% of total population of the country, As per the 2011 census; They suffer many disadvantages as compared to men in terms of literacy rates, labour participation rates and earnings. In order to address issues relating to social and economic advancement of women, the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD) under the Ministry of Human Resource Development has been implementing various schemes. Social empowerment of women is designed to create an enabling environment by adopting various affirmative policies and programmes for development of women, besides providing them easy and equal access to all the basic minimum services to enable them to realize their full potential. Educations, being an important tool for social empowerment of women, specific schemes to provide incentive to promote education, especially amongst girl children and reduce the school dropout rates are being implemented. In India, the empowerment process has already begun.

We are now witnessing a steady improvement in the enrolment of women in schools, colleges and even in profession institutes. Their health is better as compared to earlier decades. In this decade,

women are entering into the job market in increasing numbers. They are showing their skills even in non-traditional sectors like police.

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. Education can play a vital role in bringing about the desirable behavioural changes among the women and make them well equipped. In terms of knowledge, competence and capacity to deal with different socioeconomic problems. It is the most powerful tool to change the women's position in society. So, it is a wake-up call for women to awake from their deep slumber and understand the true meaning of their empowerment. The popular UNESCO slogan should be considered as an ideal for not only empowerment but also development of women: "Educate a man and you educate an individual; educate a Woman and you educate a family." At the end, it is concluded that women empowerment which is declared as Millennium Development Goal by UNDP, could be achieved only when all concerned bodies will work in cooperation and understanding. Empowering Women is an important end in itself not only as human right issue but also as having the potential to enhance.

References

1. Some key laws and policies include: Articles 14, 15, 16, 39(a), 39 (d), Domestic Violence Act (2005), *Sati* Prevention Act (1987), Dowry Prohibition Act and Rules (1985), the establishment of the Commission on the Status on Women, at the National and State levels.

2. Reservations for women exist at the Panchayat level and there is a movement to reserve 33% seats for women in all the political parties, and all levels of national and state level political structures.

3. NFHSR3 Data analysis http://www.measuredhs.com/

4. http://www.measuredhs.com/pubs/pdf/FRIND3/14Chapter14.pdf

5. http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/APCITY/UNPAN019103.pdf

6. Domestic Violence Act (2005), Article 21 of the Constitution on women's bodily integrity, Sections 375 and 376 of the Indian Penal Code, etc.

7. http://wcd.nic.in/

8. http://ncw.nic.in/frmComplaintUnit.aspx

9. http://www.thehindu.com/fline/fl2023/stories/20031121003109700.htm

10. Hindu, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhist come under the Hindu Law, whereas Christians and Muslims have their own interpretation of marriage and civil codes

11. http://www.popcouncil.org/pdfs/seeds/seeds21.pdf

12. See http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/hea_mat_morRhealthRmaternalRmortality

13. See http://www.unifem.org.in/PDF/Progress%20of%20Women%20in%20South%20Asia%20 2007.pdf

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23.   http://www.durbar.org/index.asp

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25.   See http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/23/world/asia/23ihtRindia.1.8451014.html for a story of two young women living in Bangalore and negotiating their traditional responsibilities.

26.   http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap2009/India.pdf

27.   *Ibid*

28.   http://www.measuredhs.com/pubs/pdf/FRIND3/14 Chapter 14.pdf.

29.   http://www.edarural.com/documents/SHGRStudy/ExecutiveRSummary.pdf.

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34.   http://mpra.ub.uniRmuenchen.de/4873/1/MPRA_paper_4873.pd

35.   http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/india/indian.pdf

36.   The salt march was a form of protest, lead by Gandhi through Rout India to initiate the boycotting English made salt and to symbolize the move towards nationalizing India's commodities and hence Independence from the colonial rule.

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