

RECOGNIZING THE CONTEXTS OF WOMEN'S WELL-BEING

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Significant changes occur in Indian polity and economy in the last two and a half decade and thereby the whole democratic system has undergone significant changes. It has put a thrust on democratic politics which has opened up a number of opportunities and challenges at the same time. The political discourse has also changed the emphasis from the government to the governance and essentially to good governance. With the gradual retreat of the state from its social welfare role and adoption of market economy, a shift can be discerned in the role of the state. As a result, governance as a concept gained respectability as a paradigm and coincides with the changes at the societal level. Here the question arises, how far these changes help secure human well-being. In this paper focus is on women, because as powerless and vulnerable section, they suffer most if public institutions [institutions of basic governance] function poorly. Among the most marginalized, oppressed and powerless people in India, women still form the largest group.

In the changing scenario, the assertions of the civil society towards the state made it clear that the state cannot be let off the hook; rather it has to perform in its task of governance. In fact, “‘governance’ has to be seen as a project of continuous struggle for social construction, which includes issues of inclusion, equity and equality” [Chakradarty and Bhattacharya, 2005.] United Nations Development Programme [UNDP, 1997] has defined governance in terms of the following eight characteristics. It is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. [UNDP, 1997] Drawn from the UNDP description of governance, good governance demands more dynamic, result oriented, transparent and accountable government on the one hand, and a networking of formal institutions of government, the market and the private sector and civil society on the

other. Governance is seen as a pre-requisite of development, which demands incorporation of people's agenda in the scheme of governance. Governance can further be defined as "the political direction and control exercised over the actions of the members, citizens or inhabitants of communities, societies and states." [Random House College Dictionary, 1984] As Indian democracy traversed a long span of time, there was widespread conviction that political system do not necessarily evolve in a democratic direction, rather, direct interventions are needed in institutional design and in political culture to ensure inclusion and participation of all citizens. Governance is thus understood to include the wide range of ways in which the political, social and administrative structure of a society affects the access of its members to basic opportunities and capabilities.

It has been generally argued that good governance requires not only political and civil rights but also the creations of social, economic, educational and cultural conditions which are essential for the full development of the individual. Governance has been defined to mean different things in different contexts. Good governance in relation to women has significance and meaning only when it is converted into a process of enlarging their choices as well as long and healthy life, education and access to resources needed for the decent standard of living. A society's well-being depends on ensuring that all its members feel that they have a stake in it and do not feel excluded from mainstream society. This requires that all groups, but particularly the most vulnerable have opportunities to improve or maintain their well-being. It is difficult to argue that opportunities have benefitted women to a great extent, contributed to the quality of their lives or widened the scope of their choices. The most fundamental question is how the government meets these challenges to ensure respect and promoting women's security, freedom and dignity. A question of sorts has begun on what have been the benefits of over several decades of efforts to improve the condition of women, in terms of material growth as well as their presence in political, economic and social spaces. It has been observed that our governing elite have done little to address deeply entrenched social political inequities such that progress on key social indicators has not up to the mark. The area in which the government's role is regarded as most conducive is provisioning of social services and social and physical infrastructure building to improve the quality of life.

There is a great deal of emphasis today on good governance. Women are governed by the constitution and are therefore entitled to the equality, freedom

and justice. It is ironical that women still lag behind men in terms of power, wealth and opportunity. Bound by the tradition, they have little control over their lives and unable to take the advantage of legal and political rights and other provisions meant for their upliftment. Due to existing structural patterns and systemic failure, women's lives and work are adversely impacted in both the productive and reproductive domains. A look at the social indices will also reveal that the situation of women in the areas of literacy, education, health and employment is not very promising. The problem of skewed sex ratio is very acute in India. While the national average is 940, in 50% of the states the sex ratio is below the national average. The problem is more alarming in the North West region of the country. In Haryana it is 877, in J&k it is 883, in Punjab 893, in Chandigarh it is 818, and in Rajasthan 926, in this region only Himachal Pradesh reported to have 974 which is 34 points higher than the national average. The worsening of sex ratio in India reveals the gross neglect of women. while the census figures of 2011 show an increase from 933 in 2001 to 940 in 2011, an increase of 7 points, but at the same time show an alarming decline in the sex ratio [0-6] of the country during the same period from 927 to 914, a decline of 13 points. [Census of India, 2011]. Due to malnutrition and gender biases in the allocation of food and health, girls are at the greater risk of dying during infancy made their consequences even more worse. Measures have been taken time and again to redress the acute imbalance in the sex ratio, but results have not been heartening.

In fact, neither the positive incentive schemes nor the fear of law have been able to wean away or deter unscrupulous medical practitioners and son crazed parents from aborting the female fetuses. The broad interventions in the area of health can contribute to reduced infant, child and maternal mortality. Women endure greater health problems than men. Though, women became central targets of family planning programmes 1960's onwards, yet their reproductive health needs were neither acknowledged as a policy concern nor set within an overall integrated approach to their health. The problem becomes more acute when targets for social welfare schemes are given more importance than the actual outcomes. In 1994, the government abandoned the concept of setting targets in family planning initiatives after it made an international commitment at the UN Conference on Population and Development, but it seems the mindset of party politicians and bureaucrats has not changed significantly. In November 2014, the tragedy of several women losing their lives in state sponsored tubectomy camp in

Chhatisgarh where they were operated in makeshift and dilapidated premises, point out the absence of focused attention on women's health needs and concerns. The fact that tubectomies are not meant to be performed in camps, but only in taluks or district hospitals or in private hospitals with adequate precaution and infrastructure reveal the callousness and indifferent attitude on the part of authorities. State's obsession to meet the target at any cost becomes clear when despite the ban on sterilization of members of Baiga tribe, sterilization was done on Chaita bai, a member of this very tribe^{*}. The gender bias involved in the implementation of such schemes can't be ignored either when the family planning programme is almost entirely focused on women. At present, 97% of sterilizations are the sterilizations on women, only 3% are male. Ensuring effective and equitable health services is the job of the state. Providing this on a priority basis will definitely improve the health status of women and bring improvement in the quality of their lives.

Staggering figures of violence against women also emphasize that this issue should be given utmost priority by the government. There is an upward trend in crime rate against women. They are getting killed in sobering numbers every day and there has been numerous incidence of physical harassment, rape and kidnapping, domestic violence, eve teasing and molestation etc. According to the latest data released by National Crime Record Bureau, crime against women has more than doubled over the past ten years. What is peculiar about the data provided is the rate of total crime in 2011 reported a decrease by 7.4% while that against women increased by 7.1% over 2010. It clearly reveals that while all India total crime rate is decreasing, crime against women like rapes, gang rapes, murders and sexual assault has escalated to a dangerous level. [National Crime Bureau Records, 2011] It has been informed by the Government of India in Rajya Sabha that in 2015, 32077 cases of rape were reported. It is ironical that all cases of such crimes do not get reported. Due to the lack of awareness or due to a social inhibition, people hesitate about reporting the crimes. Hence the number of crimes which remain unreported is always higher as compared to the crimes that get reported. The mere fact that so many cases are getting reported is a pointer towards a very high number of actual crimes against women. Violence is an attack on the very existence of women, challenges their integrity, their right to live as a dignified person and put obstacles in the process of their emancipation. What is worse that there have been instances which show that Indian society

is heading towards more brutal crimes against women. Nirbhaya case of 2012 is one of the heinous and horrifying crimes which bring into focus the gravity of the situation. Approach to the Crime against Women should go beyond the invasive policing. State has to create an enabling environment for the victims of violence. At the same time it has to redesign institutions to make it more women friendly and pave the way for gender security.

Government, which is the symbol and representative of society, is responsible for fixing a minimum standard of living for all its citizens. Its primary responsibility is to develop appropriate system for providing protection and assistance to its masses. Through social security policies and programmes government try to help individual members to overcome their disabilities and improve their position in society. For women, it becomes important to counter their vulnerability and entrenched inequality. Despite the existence of various government sponsored schemes, social security for women is an issue that has not been dealt efficiently as most of these schemes still fail to reach the most marginalized women in the society. Of late, it has been recognized that women's lack of access to resources is one of the major obstacles in the process of their growth. The sixth plan included a separate chapter on women and development and emphasized economic independence of women as a strategy for women's development. While highlighting the role of economic development in improving the status of women, this plan recommended the joint titles for husbands and wives in all developmental activities like transfer of assets. While emphasizing the need to open new avenues of work for women, the plan recommended that Joint-patta Schemes should be supported by credit marketing and training skills. Emphasis was also placed on generating awareness among women with regard to their rights, trainings and skills for better employment. [Chandra, 1993].

Keeping in view the specific needs of women, the eleventh five year plan also mentioned Gender Budgeting and Gender Outcome assessment and underlined the importance of Gender Audits of public expenditure, programmes and policies at national, state and districts levels. Gender budgeting is a dissection of government budget to establish its gender differential impact and to translate gender commitments into budgetary commitments. [Jain, 2007] It looks at the government budget from the gender perspective. The budget is a policy statement. It reflects the social and economic priorities of a government, the monetary embodiment of its political commitment to the specific policies and programmes. A budget appears to be gender neutral policy instrument as there is no

particular mention of man and woman, so it is incorrect to say that there is a deliberate built-in gender bias in the formulation of the budgets in India. But the way in which the national budget is usually formulated ignores the different socially determined roles responsibilities and capabilities of men and women. gender budgeting refers to the process of conceiving, planning approving executing , monitoring, analyzing and auditing budgets in a gender sensitive way. It involves an analysis of actual expenditure and revenue on women and girls as compared to men and boys. This way it helps the government to decide how policies need to be made, adjusted and reprioritized.[Yojna, 2006]. The major constraint in this regard is the non availability of gender disaggregated data and the absence of training for the administrative cadres in gender perspectives and practices.

In August 2005, the Indian parliament unanimously passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act [NREGA]. It came into force in 200 districts on Feb.2006. The Act is a significant legislation in many ways. Unlike the earlier employment schemes, it is demand driven and backed by a legal guarantee. [For details see NREGA, draft]. Though, women empowerment was not the original intentions of NREGA and is not among its main objectives. However, provisions like priority for women in the ratio of one third of total workers; equal wages for men and women and crèches for the children of women workers; were made in the Act, with a view of ensuring that rural women benefit from the schemes in a certain manner. The provisions like work within the radius of five kilometers from the house, absence of supervisor and contractor and flexibility in terms of choosing period and months of employment were not made exclusively for women but have been conducive for rural women. Despite that the emergence of women workers as independent bread-earners with control over their earnings has significant empowerment effects, such as a greater decision making role in the family, discretion to spend and control the use of their earnings, and confidence to earn independent of male family members. Empowerment of rural women has emerged as an unintended consequence of NREGA. It provides women the right to security of livelihood in their individual capacity as rights holders. At the same time, In contrast to the high participation of women in the programme as workers, their participation in process like work selection, social audit, mobilization of civil society and share in the control and management of assets created is not encouraging.

In 2009, in order to empower minority women, union government has launched Nai Roshni welfare scheme. Central ministry of minority affairs had initiated this scheme to empower and instill confidence in minority women, including Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists and Parsis, through knowledge, tools and techniques that help them interact with government systems like banks and other institutions. Funds worth Rs.23 crore were also earmarked for the scheme targeting to benefit 40,000 women in its first phase but unfortunately, no money was spent on the implementation of the scheme till June 2013. It was the consistent effort by the RTI Activist that the government did initiate action on the scheme. The government made an appraisal of the scheme through its standing finance committee and has invited proposals for conducting training programmes for minority women.[Hindustan Times, 2013]

The government has also introduced many new schemes and programmes to provide social security and empowering women. To name a few; SABLA for empowering adolescent girls, Mahila Kissan Sashaktikaran Yojana for women farmers, Dhanalakshmi to tackle the issue of declining sex ratio. Besides this, there was a launch of National Mission for Empowerment on march 2010. It was expected that this will work for strengthening inter sectoral convergence at the central, state, district and lower level of governance making it possible for women to know about and access all government schemes and programmes. The National Mission Authority, supporting Committee and the National Recourse Centre for Women have been established and have started functioning. Another landmark decision on which work has been initiated is the restructuring of the Rashtriya Mahila Kosh into a systematically important non banking finance company with an enhanced corpus of rs500 crores. Having a pan Indian office network, it was expected that it will be facilitating the financial inclusion of more than 2 lakh women from the disadvantaged sections of society on an annual basis towards the fifth year of its working. The important question here is to critically analyze whether the recourse allocation in the name of gender empowerment and her well being is really reaching women the way they intend to be and even if they reach women, do they have positive impact on them i.e. helping in transforming gender roles or simply reinforcing gender stereotypes and division of role between men and women. Though the announcements for the policies are important, yet the most significant is the outcomes for women. To expand the opportunities and freedoms for the women it is necessary to enhance their capabilities, so

that there is an improvement in the quality of life. Indian women are very much entitled to respect and rights due to all human beings. They want and expect efficient and effective performance from the governments. As governance was one of the overarching ideas of ruling party's political agenda in the 16th lok sabha elections, it is expected government should focus on the several forms of deprivation, marginalization socio economic inequalities and inequities in relation to women. Even the initiative of Modi Sarkar to improve the status of women in the form of Beti Bachao ,Beti padhao campaign, strongly reinforce gender biases. In this campaign not only the women's right to be a person in her own right is denied but difference between men and women has been maintained. The basic assumption of patriarchal social relations is taken for granted and in the process women get devalued. [Choudhary, 2015]. It is high time that government has to address gender equities in their various programmes and policies from gender perspective. The government has the knack of adopting the rhetoric of gender and the language of empowerment, now it is the time to prove its commitment by combining the rhetoric with performance. The genuine effort by the government will eventually form the foundation of a just society where women will get their rightful share.

Notes

1. In Chattisgarh in November 2014, 15 women died because of botched sterilization operations, 70 women were hospitalized. A doctor and his assistant had performed tubectomy operations on over 130 women in two days. He was then lauded by the government for his achievement. When the issue came up in the media and he was arrested and suspended, he alleged that he had been under pressure to meet the targets. [The Hindu, Nov.2015].
2. Social security is a comprehensive approach designed to prevent deprivation, assures the individual of a basic minimum income and to protect the individual from any uncertainties.

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