

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PROBLEMS OF INDIAN RURAL WOMEN

Dr. Ashutosh Pandey, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Dr. Shakuntala Misra National Rehabilitation University, Lucknow U.P. India, E-mail: ashuparsiya@rediffmail.com

The present paper concentrates mainly on social and political problems of Indian rural women. My emphasis is on the analysis of the outcome of developmental programmes regarding women's upliftment. In this paper I explore all those factors which determine the gender equality. The paper also analyses the present status of women and causes of their poor performance in the fields of social, cultural and political sphere.

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Even today, according to population in India, participation in women politics is not as much as it should be. At present there are 94 (65 Lok Sabha and 29 Rajya Sabha) women MPs in both Houses of Parliament, which is about 12 percent of the total membership, while the global average is 23 percent. The representation of women in state assemblies is even more worrying. It is worth mentioning that for the first time on 12 September 1996, the bill for women's reservation was introduced in the Lok Sabha to end the neglectful treatment of women in Indian society and strengthen their political position, which has been the politics of political parties ever since. For almost 22 years, every government of India has made a long effort to implement women's reservation in Parliament and Legislative Assemblies, which have not been successful so far. In many countries of the world, the provision of women reservation is given in the Constitution or by the Bill, while in many countries it is implemented only at the level of political parties. 30 percent reservation in Argentina, 27 percent in Afghanistan, 30 percent in Pakistan and 10 percent in Bangladesh are provided to women by making laws, while in countries where women are given reservation by political parties, Denmark (34 percent), Norway (38 Percent), Sweden (40 percent), Finland (34 percent) and Iceland (25 percent) etc. are notable. The female literacy rate is 64 percent as compared to India's 74 percent literacy rate. The economic participation of women is 42 percent, while in developed countries it is reaching 100 percent. The

participation of Indian women in work is only 28 percent, while in our neighboring Bangladesh it is also 45 percent. According to studies, women enjoyed equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. However, later, the status of women began to decline with the Smritis and with the Islamic invasion of Barber and the Mughal Empire and later Christianity curtailing women's freedom and rights. Women in India now participate in all activities such as education, politics, media, arts and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), and equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favor of women and children. Rural Development is viewed as a complex process of change in rural sub-systems and their interaction leading to **desired** improvements in rural incomes, employment opportunities, income distribution and other aspects of rural **life**. In all these activities, women who constitute half of the total strength are involved either as partners in bringing about change or as beneficiaries of these. As such, women also should be considered as the core of the rural development strategy, in view of their key roles as producers and as deliverers of basic needs, apart from concern with inequality, discrimination and the status of women. However, while rural development policies and strategies demand a great deal from women, in production, in family care, their access to knowledge, resources and decisions, which would enable them to perform these roles adequately has not received due attention, except in the recent past.¹ In view of their activities, their involvement and integration in development is vital towards eradication of problems of poverty, economic and social success.²

Since the beginning of the UN decade for women, attention has been focused on the role of rural women in development. However, it is said that like development in general, rural development is also regressive in effect in relation to women. As the UN decade for women has been over, it is pertinent to look into the Indian experience in involving and integrating women in rural development.

Women constitute nearly half of the work force in the rural areas in the developing countries though their contribution to economic and social development remained largely invisible.³ The issue has attracted attention in the world at large.⁴ A perceptive understanding of women rural economic activity is necessary to evaluate the strategy aimed at involving women in rural development and their outcomes.⁵ Women's activities are broadly divided

into three categories : (a) Income producing, (b) Income-substituting, and (c) Home-making and child care.⁶ To this one must add an important activity like participation in decision-making.

Case studies conducted in various developing countries including India as part of the inter-regional ILO project on 'Energy and Rural Women's Work' confirm that rural women tend to work longer hours than men over all, with about half or' their working hours devoted to essential survival tasks such as fetching fuel and water, cooking and childcare which are not generally considered 'productive labour'.⁷ A time disposition study on work participation by landless poor revealed that the average number of work hours per day varied from 15.00 to 18.07 hours and the time spent on domestic work alone is more than 8 hours excluding child care.⁸

Thus, women as care takers of the home spend more than an 8 hour work day with little or no financial reward, a thankless job for many women. Equating female leadership with the dynastic account of leadership of females in South and Southeast Asia does not adequately explain the varied paths to power that many female political leaders in India have followed, at least in the past two decades. It also does not reflect the changing political scene in India which has seen the growing importance of the state level parties, resulting in a regionalization of politics, thus allowing regional or sub-national leaders to become more influential at the national level. Prominent female politicians demonstrate the diverse manifestations of female political leadership in India.

Structural gender bias and gender-biased perceptions and expectations are understood to have a significant impact on assessments of behavioral style and performance. Yet these sources of gender power can be utilized by leaders, reinforcing and legitimizing stereotypes in exchange for political power. Identity politics and political discourse play important roles in the exercise of leadership. However, the implications for women's political participation suggest little short-term benefits for women in politics. The changing political system has only worked to catapult a few women into positions of power.

Nevertheless, female political participation and leadership in the local panchayats does have potential implications for the future generation of political leaders and the political participation of women. Contemporary accounts differ somewhat in explaining a leader's path to power, but many accounts reproduce an insider/outsider dichotomy, which distinguishes between two sets of individuals. "Insiders" have risen through the ranks of the political

institutional infrastructure whereas "outsiders", come to political leadership and/or formal political activity with little experience of the "rules of the game" yet may possess popularity, expertise, ambition, or substantial interest in policy issues, or any combination of these.

Gendered accounts of leadership highlight an additional category, the political 'surrogate', which, while similar to the concept of 'outsider', takes on its own unique significance in dynastic accounts of female leadership. There are two features that are important in the accession to Indian leadership-those of winning mandates and a leader's pathway to power. The importance of an individual's pathway to power in determining their legitimacy is especially relevant to the critique of the dynastic account of female leadership because " (t) he path taken to leadership in some part determines the power held by the leader, the legitimacy of his leadership, and, to some extent, support for his policies" Therefore, a leader's route to the top determines in part the legitimacy that he or she commands and has implications for the success and sustainability of that leadership. The political mobilization of women during the fight for Independence has been identified as one of the key factors in determining women's political participation in contemporary times. Several accounts of the women's movement in **India** which accompanied the nationalist struggle for independence from British rule, note the lack of an emancipator outcome and the enduring subservient nature of women's role in society Women were welcome to join the resistance to British colonial rule, but their political activity was encouraged only insofar as to support the traditional gender hierarchy within Indian society. As long as their political activity supplemented but didn't sacrifice their traditional duties as wives, daughters and sisters, their political activism was encouraged. However, several male supporters of reform for women's issues supported women's franchise.

Crucially, the nature of the women's movement and the participation of women in politics in India must be understood in terms of the impact of colonialism. Women rejected the label of "feminist" for fear of being accused of as unpatriotic; the enemy in their understanding was not their male counterparts but the forces of colonial power and "foreign domination". While the nationalist leader M.K. Gandhi supported the notion of female suffrage, he emphasized the need for unity and solidarity against the British Raj.

Gandhi consistently mobilized the Hindu goddess of Sita as the supportive and sacrificing wife; in the process, "Gandhi was constructing a new ideal for Indian women that rewrote passivity and self-suffering as strength". Despite successful mobilization of women's

organizations such as the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), these organizations largely benefited middle-class women by providing experience of working within organizational structures. There were however, significant advances in women's legal rights and progress in addressing the need for women's education, and with Independence women did obtain the franchise. Furthermore, their demands for a place in the government of newly Independent India were legitimized by their involvement in the nationalist movement.

The role of Indian women in post- Independence and modern Indian politics is directly related to the lack of a significant outcome for the women's movement after the achievement of Independence from, British rule by the nationalists. While a liberal discourse of equality ensued upon Independence in 1947, by 1974 the Committee on the Status of Women in India produced a commissioned report titled.

In the last **two decades, the Hindutva movement** has also become a site of women's right-wing political mobilization although with dubious potential for the empowerment of women, and has become particularly militant around communal issues. Modern Indian politics has seen political parties' appropriate women's issues, such as the concerns of the antiarrack movement, and appear sympathetic towards them in order to capture the women's vote. By adopting the interests of what could be considered a sub-altern group in India, they are, employing a populist strategy. Change may therefore prove elusive and sympathy may turn out to be pure rhetoric, as political U-turns on prohibition laws have demonstrated.

Empowerment of women involves many things economic opportunity, social equality, and personal rights. Women are deprived of these human rights, often as a matter of tradition. In rural areas, women are generally not perceived to have any meaningful income generation capacity, and hence, they are relegated mainly to household duties and cheap labour. Without the power to work and earn a good income, their voices are silenced there is no easy or quick fix to the problems related to women's empowerment and reproductive health in rural India. The real solution lies in a holistic approach that deals with all the major interrelated issues of economic welfare, social justice, education, health, and traditions/spirituality. The three key ingredients of success are trust, infrastructure for delivery, and financial incentives. Behavioural change can be initiated and promoted only by those who have earned the trust of the people they claim to serve; government officials are amongst the least trusted, and hence, they are the most ill-suited for the task. People listen to those whom they trust, but still may not act without financial incentives that are offered through economic opportunities, and

without actually seeing the infrastructure for delivery of services. Private initiatives in rural areas need not always be charitable or non-profit. In fact, products and services, including education and health services, paid for through fees based on income levels can be very effective in stimulating a village's economy. Private companies need to be encouraged to deliver products and services for profit, but at affordable costs. When non-profit institutions work with profit-oriented private companies in a competitive environment, products and services are delivered at an economic cost that even most rural people can afford.

Male violence against women is a worldwide phenomenon. Although not every woman has experienced it, and many expect not to, fear of violence is an important factor in the lives of most women. It determines what they do, when they do it, where they do it, and with whom. Fear of violence is a cause of women's lack of participation in activities beyond the home, as well as inside it. Within the home, women and girls may be subjected to physical and sexual abuse as punishment or as culturally justified assaults. These acts shape their attitude to life, and their expectations of themselves. The insecurity outside the household is today the greatest obstacle in the path of women.

Through the experience of **the Indian Panchayat Raj** Institutions (PRI) 1 million women have actively entered political life in India. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, which guarantee that all local elected bodies reserve one-third of their seats for women, have spearheaded an unprecedented social experiment which is playing itself out in more than 500,000 villages that are home to more than 600 million people. Since the creation of the quota system, local women-the vast majority of them illiterate and poor-have come to occupy as much as 43% of 'the seats, spurring the election of increasing numbers of women at the district, provincial and national levels. Since the onset of PRI, the percentages of women in various levels of political activity have risen from 4-5% to 25-40%. The Indian constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. The National Commission for Women was set up by act of parliament in 1990 to safeguard the right and legal entitlement of women. The 73rd amendment (1993) to the constitution of India has provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of panchayats for women laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at local levels. Thus, the Indian constitution contains The problems of women of rural society are of a different nature. In rural society 90 percent of the women are dependent on agriculture and in unorganized sector 98 percent are women.

Rural women have to work continuously for 16-18 hours. The women's movements raised their voice for the participation of women in power, which resulted in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment being implemented and the provision of one-third, now 50 percent female reservation in the Panchayati Raj system. As a result, there are about 14 lakh women people's representatives at present. But in reality, the men took away this opportunity from them and the rights of the female people's representative who were elected in the panchayats are being exercised by her husband, father or brothers, and the rural woman still maintains her traditional household chores in the walls of the house. The voice of the rural woman has remained suppressed in the women's movements. Whatever rights are being received today, only the women of the urban middle class are getting it and the rural women are absent in the organized labor market, due to which they are not able to stand against their exploitation and unbecoming atrocities. In a wide range of provisions sufficient to protect and preserve the interest of women in India.

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