

Empowerment of Women

Essay No. 01

A lot is being heard these days on the need for the empowerment of women. Women, everybody knows, continue to suffer and have an inferior status in society as compared to their male counterparts. They are lagging behind in all fields. In spite of all the media hype regarding the equality of sexes, things have yet to improve.

Despite law, female foeticide, female infanticide and dowry death are staring the society in the face. Child marriage is still prevalent in many parts of the country. Girls are not being sent to school in many areas. Incidents of sexual harassment of women, eve-teasing, sexual abuse of female children and rape are on the rise in spite of spread of education. Thousands of widows are living in object poverty and women labourers continue to be oppressed in the absence of proper legislation to protect them. In such a situation it is no surprise that the birth of a girl child is still considered to be a curse and an occasion for sorrow in thousands of families. In a country where there is the rich tradition of 'kanjak' puja, women continue to be treated as inferior to men.

In the face of this situation some enlightened countrymen have started asking for the empowerment of women. They rightly feel 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, they say. Great men like Swami Vivekanand, Gandhi ji, Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chander Vidyasagar have also been championing the cause of greater rights and a better status to women. With the march of civilization, several women have come to occupy prominent positions of strength and status on their own merit. Some of these names worth mentioning are those of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Chandrika Kumaratunge, Golda Meir, Margaret Thatcher, Kiran Bedi, Kalpana Chawla, Nisha Sharma, etc. These women have already done their country and their society proud. But they form only a microscopic minority.

Several efforts have been made in free India to give a better status to the women folk in the country. Some of these steps are a programme of support to Training cum Employment of Women (STEP) launched in 1987. Swayamsidha launched in March 2001, Swa-Shakti Project launched in October 1998 and the Anti- Dowry Act. But all these steps have proved inadequate. The amendment of the Constitution (73 and 74) by the Parliament giving representation to women on the local bodies (Panchayats and Municipal

bodies) has certainly made some mark. Women are now entering politics in large numbers.

The bill regarding the 33 percent reservation of seats for women in the State Assemblies and the Parliament is still pending on one pretext or the other, it is being put off the successive governments. It remains, will the empowerment of women really change their status? Some people believe that it may improve the status of women but what is required is a change in the social attitude lowers the fair sex. A lot could also be achieved through education rather than reservation. Women have marching ahead. No power can stop them now. Do they really need empowerment through laws, this remains a million-dollar question?

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Prior to International Women's Day on 8th March, World Rural Women Day was celebrated sometime back on a subdued note. However, in Haryana, an important thing happened when the Chief Minister announced at a seminar in Chandigarh that cooperative societies for procurement of milk would be set up in each village of Haryana to enable farmers to enhance their income. This was a very good announcement.

However, the important thing to be noted was that the women from certain areas from Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh at the seminar expressed great satisfaction with the cooperatives which already were in operation. Thus, they could easily sell milk from their cattle at competitive rates and add to the earning of their families. This instance shows that rural women may be illiterate, still they can do a lot for themselves and their families if they are provided an opportunity.

There are innumerable suggestions laid down for empowerment of women. One of them is that certificates-issued by all educational institution and universities should bear the name of mother along with father. Similarly, for recruitment to any post in any office, government or private, the application form should have a column for the name of mother apart from that of father. Another suggestion is that women should always write their maiden name also while writing their name after marriage.

At present, we find women making remarkable progress in every field of life. They outshine boys in school, college and university examinations. They are found in all professions such as teaching, medicine, engineering, law, management, business, administration, etc. It must, however, be admitted that

the number of women who hold high posts is not large. Most of the women in rural and slum areas are still poor, illiterate and superstitious.

Women are still being exploited and persecuted. Crimes against women have greatly increased. There are innumerable cases of molestation, rape and bride burning. They are discriminated against even in recruitment services, promotes, etc. According to law one woman is a must in every panchayat, and some municipal and legislature constituencies are reserved for women. But actually, it is the woman panch or legislator's husband who wields all the power in the name. of his wife. Women are given relaxation in the matter of income tax which is a very good sign for the uplifting of women. However, 33 per cent reservations for women in all fields, is still a far Cry. Women need more empowerment to enable them to assert themselves. Let them also show more boldness and self-confidence.

Meanwhile, there are already several major policy initiatives, schemes and laws for the empowerment of women. These are National Commission for Women (NCW), Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) Kishori Shakti Yojna (KSY), Nutrition Programme for Adolescent Girls (NPAG), Support of Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP); Rural Women Development and Empowerment Project (RWDEP), Dowry Prohibition. Act, The Immoral (Prevention) Act, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, Sexual Harassment of Women at the Work Places Bill, etc.