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Women's Education and Empowerment in Indian Knowledge Traditions

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Abstract

The present research paper focuses on Women's Education and Empowerment in Indian Knowledge Traditions. In the context of adopting human development, as the ultimate goal of all over developmental efforts, empowerment of women gains priority. Women account for 495.74 million and represent 48.3 percent of country's total population as per the 2001 census. The country's concern in safeguarding the rights and privileges of women found its best expansion in the Constitution of India. While Article 14 confers equal rights and opportunities men and women in the political, economic and social spheres. Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of sex, religion, race, caste etc, and Article 15 (3) empowers the State to make affirmative discrimination in favour of women. Similarly, Article 16 provides for equality of opportunity in the matter of public appointments for all citizens; Article 39 stipulates that the State shall direct its policy towards providing men and women equally the right to means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work; Article 42 directs the State to make provisions for ensuring just and human conditions of work and maternity relief; and Article 51 (A) (e) imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. To make this de-jure equality into a de-facto one, many policies and programmes have been put into action from time to time, beside enacting/ enforcing special legislations, in favour of women

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Education for Women's Equality: National Policy on Education

The NPE (1986 and is modified in 1992) has made the following observations in Part III in Paras 4.2 and 4.3 under the Theme 'Education for Women's Equality.

- 4.2: Education will be used as an agent basic charge in the status of women. In order to neutralise the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be a conceived edge in favour of women. The National Education System will play a positive, interventionist role in the development of women. It will be foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, textbooks, the training and orientation of teachers, decision makers and administrators and the active involvement of educational institutions. This will be an act of faith and social engineering. Women studies will be prompted as a part of various courses and educational institutions and encouraged to take up active programmes to further women's development.
- 4.3: The removal of women's illiteracy and obstacles inhabiting their access to, and retention in, elementary education will receive over-riding priority, through provision of social support services, setting of time targets, and effective monitoring. Major emphasis will be laid on women's participation in vocational, technical and professional education at different levels. The policy of non-discrimination will be pursued vigorously to eliminate sex-stereotyping in vocational and

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professional courses and to promote women's participation in non-traditional occupations, as well as in existing and emergent technologies.

Life-Cycle Approach to Empowerment of Women

Empowering women as a process demands a life-cycle approach. Therefore, every stage of their life counts as a priority in the planning process. Depending upon the developmental needs at every stage, female population has been categorised into 5 distinct sub-groups (population as projected for 2001They include:

- Girl children in the age-group ze 0-14 years who account for 171.50 million (34.6%), deserve special attention because of the gender bias anti discrimination they suffer from at such a tender age;
- Adolescent girls in the age-group 15-19 years who account for 52.14 million (10.5%) are very sensitive from the viewpoint of planning because of the preparatory stage for their future productive and reproductive roles in the society and family, respectively;
- Women in the reproductive age-group 15-44 years numbering 233.72 million (47.1%) need special care and attention because of their reproductive needs;
- Women in the economically active age-group 15-59 years, who account for 289.40 million (58.4%), have different demands like those of education/training, employment, income generation and participation in the developmental process, decision making etc; and
- The elderly woman in the age-group 60+ years numbering 34.87 million (7.0%), have limited needs mainly relating to health, financial and emotional support.

Economic Empowerment of Women

Ensure provision of training, empowerment and income generation activities with both 'forward' and 'backward' linkages with the ultimate objective of making all women economically independent and self-reliant through;

- Organising women into Self-help Groups under various poverty alleviation programmes, viz. Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozger Yojana (SGSY), Swarna Jayanti Shahri Rozar Yojana (SJSRY), Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK), Support for Training and Empowerment Programme (STEP), Training-cum- Production Centres for Women (NORAD) etc, and offering them a range of economic options along with necessary support measures to enhance their capabilities and earning capabilities with an ultimate objective of making them economically independent and selfie-reliant.
- Ensuring that women in the Informal Sector who account for more than 90% are given special attention with regards to improving their working conditions as the same continued to be very precarious without even minimum or equal wages, leave aside other legislative safeguards.
- Making concerted efforts to ensure that the benefits of training and extension in agriculture and its allied activities of horticulture, small animal husbandry, poultry, fisheries, etc. reach women in proportion to their numbers, and also issue of joint Pattas for husband and wife under the Social Forestry and Joint Forest Management programmes.
- Ensuring that the employers fulfill their legal obligations towards their women workers in extending child care facilities, maternity benefits, special leave, protection from occupational hazards, allowing formation of women workers' associations/unions, legal protection aid etc.
- Re-training/upgrading the skills of women displaced from traditional sectors due to advancement of technology so that they can take up jobs in the new and expanding areas of employment and formulating appropriate policies and programmes to promote alternative opportunities wage/self-employment in traditional sectors like khadi and village industries, handicrafts, handlooms, sericulture, small scale and cottage industries.
- Initiating affirmative action to ensure at least 30% of reservation for women in services in the public sector as their representation in 1999 was only 14.5%, along with required provisions for upward mobility.

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- Increasing access to credit for women either through the establishment of new micro-credit mechanisms or micro-financial institutions catering to women or strengthening existing arrangements in this area along with an expansion of the limited coverage of RMK.

Social Empowerment (Including Education of Women)

Creating an enabling environment through adopting various affirmative developmental policies and programmes for development of women, besides providing them easy and equal access to all the basic minimum services so as to enable them to realise their full potential through;

- Providing easy and access to ensure basic minimum services of primary health care and family welfare with a special focus on the under-served and under-privileged segments of population through universalising Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) services.
- Achieving the goals set by the National Population Policy (2000) with regards to reducing Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) to 30 per 1000 and Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) to 100 per lakh live births by 2010.
- Supplementing health care and nutrition services through the Pradhan Mantri Gramoday Yojana (PMGY) to fill the critical gaps in the existing primary health care infrastructure and nutrition services.
- Tackling both micro and macro-nutrient deficiencies through nutrition supplementary feeding programmes with necessary support services like health check-ups, immunisation, health and nutrition education and nutrition awareness etc.
- Consolidating the process made under female education and carrying it forward for achieving the set goal of 'Education for Women's Equality' as advocated by the National Policy on Education, 1986 (revised in 1992)
- Providing easy and access to and free education for women and girls at all levels and in the field of technical and vocational education and training in up-coming and job-oriented trades.
- Increasing enrolment/retention rates and reducing drop-out rates by expanding the support services through mid-day meals, hostels and incentives like free supply of uniforms, textbooks, transport charges etc.
- Extending the existing network of regional vocational training centres to all the states and Women's Industrial Training Institutes and Women's Wings with General Industrial Training Institutes with residential facilities in all districts and sub-districts and provision of training in marketable trades.
- Encouraging the media to project positive images of women and the Girl Child, change the mind-set of the people and thus promote the balance portrayals of women and men.
- Gender sensitising both the administrative and enforcement machinery and ensuring that the rights and interests of women are taken care of, besides involving them in planning, implementation and monitoring to processes.

Gender Justice by Removing Gender Discrimination

Eliminate all forms of gender discrimination and, thus, enable women to enjoy not only de-jure but also de-facto rights and fundamental freedom on par with men in all spheres, viz. political, economic, social, civil, cultural etc. through;

- Complete eradication of female foeticide and female Infanticide through effective enforcement of both the Indian Panel Code, 1860 and the Pre-natal Diagnostic Technique (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act,1994 with most stringent measures of punishment so that very harsh path is set for the illegal practitioners.
- Adopting measures that take into account the reproductive rights of women to enable them to exercise their reproductive choices.
- Working out strategies, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Labour, to ensure extension of employment opportunities and thus, remove inequalities in employment-both in work and accessible.

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- Initiating interventions at the macro-economic level to amend existing legislations to improve women's assets and resources.
- Ensuring that the value added by women in the Informal Sector as workers and producers in recognised through redefinition/reinterpretation of conventional concepts of work and preparation Satellite and National Accounts.
- Defining the Women's Component Plan (WCP) clearly and identifying the schemes/programmes/projects under each Ministry/Development which should be covered under WCP and ensuring the adoption of women related mechanisms through which funds/benefits flow to women from these sectors.
- Initiating action for enacting new women-specifies legislations, amending the existing women-related legislation, if necessary, based on the review made and recommendations already available to ensure gender justice, besides, reviewing all the subordinate legislations to eliminate all gender discriminatory references.
- Expanding action to legislate reservation of not less than 1/3 seats for women in the Parliament and in the State Legislative Assemblies and thus ensure women in proportion to their numbers reach decision-making bodies so that their voices are heard.
- Arresting the ever-increasing violence against women and the Girl Child including the adolescent girls on top priority with strength and support of a well-planned Programme of Action prepared in consultation with all the concerned, especially the enforcement authorities, implementing effectively with the strength of the Law and Order Authorities both at the centre and state levels and assessing the situation.
- Expanding standardisation of a Gender Development Index based on which the gender segregated data will be collected at national, state and district levels, compiled/collated and analysed to assess the progress made in improving the status of women at regular intervals with an ultimate objective of achieving equality on par with men.
- Initiating/accelerating the process of societal reorientation towards creating a Gender-Just Society.

Legislative Support For Women

Women-special Legislations

- The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act 1956
- The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 (28 of 1961)
- The Indecent Representation of Women Prohibition Act, 1986
- The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987 3 (of 1988)

Women-related Legislations

- The Guardians and Wards Act, 1860 (8 of 1890)
- Indian Panel Code, 1960
- The Christian Marriage Act, 1872 (15 of 1872)
- Indian Evidence Act, 1872 (yet to be reviewed)
- The Married Women's Property Act, 1874 (3 of 1874)
- The Workmen's Compensation Act, 1923
- The Legal Practitioners (Women) Act, 1923
- The Indian Succession Act, 1925 (39 of 1925)
- The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 (19 of 1929)
- The Payment of Wages Act, 1936
- The Muslim Personal Law (Shariyat) Application Act, 1937
- The Factories Act, 1948
- The Minimum Wages Act, 1948
- The Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948
- The Plantation Labour Act, 1951
- The Cinematograph Act, 1952

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Conclusion

The conclusion is that if Gender Justice is to be ensured, women need to be empowered socially, economically and politically. If women are to be empowered socially, it is necessary to make everyone of them literate, reach them information and generate awareness, equip them with legal literacy and help them in every way to realise their own potential. If women are to be empowered economically, it is necessary to equip them with vocational skills, provide empowerment and income generation, extend free channels of micro-credit, provide management entrepreneurial skills, social security and thus allow them greater visibility. If women are to be empowered politically, the immediate need is or adopt to different forms of affirmative discriminations so that wemen in proportionate numbers reach critical places to ensure that their voices are heard. In fact, it is the empowerment strategy that has emerged as the most challenging task not only for those who are working for women, but also for women themselve.

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