

Early Efforts for Women Empowerment in India since 1947

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Abstract: In the process of poverty eradication and reducing gender discrimination, the government has been implementing various policies and schemes providing means towards women's development and empowerment. The improvement in means of communication, the spread of education and a host of government policies favouring the deprived classes effect greatly while weakening the caste system which contributed to altering the nature of social relationships.¹ This viewpoint was made in a concrete sense with the concept of planning at the national level in 1950. In the first two Five Year Plans, an effort was made to give relief to the people living Below Poverty Line (BPL) in a perpetual state of neglect for centuries out of which majority were the Dalit, and surprisingly more than their proportion into the total population.² The women face discrimination in access to a dignified life, for legal redressal, for equal wages, for her right in the decision-making process, and also to get benefits from the schemes initiated by the government for their welfare.³

The attitude of the Government towards women after the partition of India:

After attaining independence in 1947, the Indian union government initially decided to bring about social change based on three major areas which were constitutional and legal reforms, planned development based on the mixed economy and state support to social welfare activities. All these three policies were expected to create a democratic, just and prosperous society.⁴ While framing the constitution of India, special attention has been paid towards the needs of women to enable them to exercise their rights on equal footing with men

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¹ M N Srinivas, "An Obituary on Caste as a System" in **Economic and Political Weekly**, Vol. 38, No. 5 (February 1-7, 2003) p. 457

² Anil Kumar Bhardwaj, **Schemes for Welfare of Scheduled Castes in Punjab: A Study in Gandhian Perspective (Unpublished Ph. D Thesis)**, 2000: Panjab University, Chandigarh, p. 111

³ Bela Malik, "Untouchability and Dalit Women's Oppression" in **Economic and Political Weekly**, Vol. 34, No. 6, (February 6-12, 1999), p. 323.

⁴ Neera Desai, "Changing Status of Women, Policies and Programmes" in Amit Kumar Gupta (Ed.) **Women and Society-Development Perspective**, New Delhi: Quiterion Publishers, 1986, p. 1

and even to participate in national development. The framers of Indian constitution aimed at creation of an entirely new social order where all the citizens are given equal opportunities for growth and development and that no discrimination takes place on the basis of race, religion, sex, caste, etc. they considered planned development to be the most efficient way for solving problems like poverty which had caused various imbalanced and discriminations among the people. Their first step to coping up such a problem was to frame five-year plans in the direction of the welfare state.⁵ The planning commission located three major areas in which special attention was a need for the development of women which were education, social welfare, and health. It was only due to the recommendations made by the committee on the status of women in its report mentioning that women were considered to be handicapped by social customs and social values and, therefore, social welfare services had especially endeavoured to rehabilitate for them.

Five Year Plans and the Women in India:

The First Five Year Plan (1951-56) includes welfare schemes for women. Under this plan, Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) was established in 1953 to deal with the problems of women which later on realized the need for organizing women into *Mahila Mandals* as an approach to community development.⁶ In the Second Five Year Plan (1956-61) the main focus was on intensive agricultural development. But the welfare approach to women's issues was determined to recognize women as workers. It was also tried to provide the women protection against injuries at the workplace, maternity benefits and even crèches for their children. The most significant suggestion made under this plan was to implement the principle of equal pay for equal work and provision for training to enable women to compete for higher jobs. The Third Five Year Plan (1961-66) made an effort to provide education facilities for women which have been a major welfare strategy for women. This plan allocated the largest share for expending social welfare services and condensed courses of education. Such a sincere approach for women's education was continued during the Fourth Five Year Plan (1969-1974). It was tried to promote women's welfare as the base of operation. The outlay on family planning was stepped up to reduce the birth rate through education.⁷ The Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-1979) stressed the need for training women in

⁵ Neera Desai, "Changing Status of Women, Policies and Programmes" in Amit Kumar Gupta (Ed.) **Women and Society-Development Perspective**, New Delhi: Quiterion Publishers, 1986, Pg. 44

⁶ **CSWB Report, 2016.**

⁷ **CSWB Report, 2016.**

respect to income-generating activities and their protection. This plan also emphasized on providing more avenues for education to women to equip them with the skills and knowledge to perform the functions as good housewives too.⁸ This Plan was happened to be in the decade of International Women's decade and a Report of Committee on the status of women in India (CSWI) was also submitted. This report referred to the dynamics of social change and development that has adversely affected a large section of women and had created new imbalances and disparities.

The Sixth Five Year Plan (1980- 1985) included women's development as one of the developmental sectors and included a separate chapter for women and development. It also endorsed the need for economic independence educational advance and access to health care and family planning for women's development.⁹The Seventh Five Year Plan (1985- 1990) was initiated to generate awareness among women about their rights and privileges. In this plan, an effort was made to enhance the social and economic status of women in order to bring them into the mainstream of national development and recognized their importance in contributing to various social, economic, cultural and political activities. Under this plan, new avenues of work were opened for women to perceive them as a crucial resource for the development of the country. A new scheme with the name of 'Women's Development Corporation' was taken up in this plan for promoting employment generating activities by supporting schemes from women's groups and women from poorer sections of society. A cell was also set up for women's development planning and monitoring to collect data for better implementation of policies. Many new programs were initiated to extend direct benefits to women.¹⁰ In the course of this plan, the Indian Parliament adopted a National Policy on Education 1986 which included separate chapters on Education for Women's Equality and Education of SC/ST and other Backward Sections. The Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-1997) made an extra effort to ensure that the benefits of development from different sectors did not bypass women and some special programs were initiated to complement the general programs. This Plan aimed to extend the reach of services to women birth qualitatively and quantitatively. Now Panchayati Raj institutions are involved in the designing and implementation of women's programs. This made a definite shift from development to the

⁸ M. K. Widge, "Gender Issue in Development" in *Yojna* June 15, 1993 Vol. 37, No. 10, Publication Division, Government of India, New Delhi, p-12

⁹ Neera Desai and Amit Kumar Gupta, **Women and Society in India**, Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1987, p. 333

¹⁰ <http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/7th/vol2/7v2ch14.html>

empowerment of women as we may see a progressive increase in the plan outlays over the time of the eighth five-year plan. It was just Rs. 4 Crores in the First Five Year Plan which had gone up to Rs. 2000 Crores in the Eighth Five Year Plan.¹¹ The Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) added an approach paper which included special stress on the empowerment of women and people's participation in planning and implementation of strategies. In this plan, the empowerment of women means choices for women and opportunities to avail these choices. The government tried to provide a supportive environment to women at all stages at home, school, religion and even at the workplace. The women were facing problems like feminization of poverty, inadequate investment in social sectors, increasing violence against women and stereotyped portrayal of women in private and state media especially television. The special stress was made on involving women in policymaking.¹² As a result, a number of initiatives have been launched like the ban on sex determination tests so as to prevent female feticide. 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1993 ensured reservation of 1/3 of seats for women in all elected offices of local bodies, in rural and urban areas. Such efforts made a strong passage for women empowerment in India. The Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-2007) aims at empowering women through translating the recently adopted National Policy for Empowerment of Women into action. All the measures were taken to guarantee women's equal access to all the facilities and full participation in decision making institutions at all levels even at legislative, executive, judicial, statutory bodies, etc. During this plan, women-friendly policies were drawn up to encourage women to participate effectively in the developmental process.¹³ The Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-2012) aimed to raise the female sex ratio. It had the vision to eradicate the multifaceted exclusions and discriminations faced by the women. In this plan, first time, the women were recognized not just as equal citizens but as agents of economic and social growth. It was tried to ensure the participation and adequate representation of women at the highest policy levels and to strengthen existing institutional mechanisms and create new ones for gender mainstreaming and effective policy implementation.¹⁴ The Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-2017) also aims to empower women in all the spheres of life. This plan is focused on women's economic empowerment, social and physical infrastructure, participation in governance and engendering national policies. The

¹¹ <http://www.pc.gov.pk/five%20year%20plans/8th/Eight%20Five%20Year%20Plan.pdf>

¹² <http://www.planningcommission.gov.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/9th/vol2/v2c3-8.htm>

¹³ <http://mahilakalyan.up.nic.in/child/NATIONAL%20POLICY%20FOR%20THE%20EMPOWERMENT%20OF%20WOMEN.pdf>

¹⁴ http://www.planningcommission.gov.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/11th/11_v2/11v2_ch6.pdf

strategies for inclusion of vulnerable women such as those belonging to the Dalit, Scheduled Tribes, Minorities, differently-abled, migrants and trafficked women have been identified in this plan.¹⁵

Some additional efforts for women empowerment in India:

After the independence of India, the government took certain steps for planned development based on the mixed economy and state support to social welfare activities. The Indian constitution has given certain provisions to exercise the rights for women to march while equal footing with men and contribute to national development. It provides equal opportunities for growth and development to all without any sort of discrimination. Such a right provided a space for the women to strengthen their position. The concept of women's development emerged with the debates initiated by the women's movements during the 1980s when the feminist from the third world countries evinced dissatisfaction with the prevailing development discourse that was largely political and economic in its orientation. They thought empowerment as a socio-political process that required shifts in social, political and economic power between and across both individuals and social groups.¹⁶ The significant programs initiated in this series are as follow:

(a) National Perspective Plan for Women 1988-2000:

The National Perspective Plan for Women was brought out by the Department of Women and Child Department, Ministry of Human Resources Development. In this plan, special attention was paid towards the women in the rural area who suffers from double discrimination. This plan gave a new thrust to developmental programs. The significant aim of this plan is to promote the development of women in all the spheres. The significant recommendations made under this plan are:

- Need for inter-ministerial coordination and monitoring body in the Department of Women and Child Development
- Education for women with priority to contribute effectively to the socio-economic development of the country
- To eliminate all forms of discrimination in employment especially to manage wage differences between men and women

¹⁵ http://www.planningcommission.gov.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/12th/pdf/12fyp_vol3.pdf
¹⁶ [www.opendemocracy.net /article/putting_power_back_into_empowerment_0](http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/putting_power_back_into_empowerment_0)

- To establish a special women's cell in every ministry and government department
- To raise the social consciousness in the country, strategic change is required in national media
- To review and strengthen law drafting technologies and enforcement mechanism to provide equality and justice for women
- To secure the participation of women in the decision-making process at National, State, and Local levels
- To provide thirty percent reservation for women at Panchayat and at the district level

(b) National Commission for Women:

The National Commission for Women (NCW) was constituted on January 31, 1992, under the National Commission for Women Act, 1990 to encourage and advise on the planning process of socio-economic development of women and also to evaluate the progress and development of women under the central and state governments. This Commission initiated significant steps to improve the status of women and worked for their empowerment. The major activities of this Commission are, investigation, examination, and review of all the matters related to safeguards provided to them under the Indian Constitution; review of the implementation of women-specific and women related legislation and to suggest suitable amendments wherever needed; keeping surveillance and facilitating redress of grievances of women and many more. The Commission has been at the forefront of the national endeavour to improve the status of women in society and work for their overall empowerment. The important activities that this Commission has been undertaking besides review of laws and legislation are inquiries related to violence against the women, organizing seminars, workshops, public hearing, organizing *Bal Vivah Virodh Abhiyan*, interacting with the members of parliament and others regarding pending women related bills, organizing *Parivarik Mahila Lok Adalats* and legal awareness programmes, sponsoring studies on women-related issues and many more. Generally, a point that is raised regarding this Commission is that it is functioning more as an advisory board. Since this is the nodal agency for the protection of the rights of women, it needs to be empowered further to function as a statutory body with more powers.

(c) National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001:

Indian Government declared 2001 as the Women Empowerment Year. So this year, the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women was introduced. This policy had certain clear objectives such as women empowerment in socio-economic and politico-cultural spheres by creating awareness among the women on such issues. The objectives of this policy were to bring about the advancement of development and empowerment of women. This policy was designated to encourage the active participation of all stakeholders for achieving its objectives. The significant objectives of this policy were:

- To make an environment through positive economic and social policies for the absolute development of women to enable them to realize their full potential
- To provide enjoyments of all human rights and fundamental freedom for women on an equal basis with men in all the spheres i.e. political, social, cultural, economic and civil
- Equal access for women to participate in decision making for the social, economic and political life of the country
- Equal access to women for health care, education, career, and vocational guidance, equal remuneration, employment, occupational health and safety, social security and public offices, etc.
- To strengthen the legal system for the elimination of all forms of discriminations against women
- To change the attitude of society and community towards prevailing practices by involving actively both the men and women
- To encourage gender perspective in the development process
- To eliminate discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl-child
- To create and strengthen the environment of partnership with the civil society especially with the women's organizations

This policy introduced a pro-gender perspective in the budgeting process as an operational strategy. The legal and judicial system was made more responsive and gender-sensitive to cater to the needs of women especially in case of domestic violence and personal assault. Some new laws were enacted and some other existing laws were reviewed to ensure quick justice. All these efforts paved a way for creating an atmosphere for the empowerment of women in India.