



Women empowerment through five year plans in India

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Abstract

Women empowerment as a concept and philosophical basis of social policy is of recent origin. But the meaning, theme and the struggle it includes is of ancient origin. The concept of women's empowerment in the modern context can be traced to the latter half of the 1970s when it was increasingly discussed and promoted by Third World feminists and women's organizations. Women's empowerment forms a theoretical framework that emphasizes the subordination of women. The significance in the role of women in development had been recognized by the Government of India right from the First Five Year Plan (1951-1956). Women's inclusion in inclusive growth is only then possible when inclusive democracy turned to be reality not the myth. In the Five Year Plan women were considered as the subject of welfare and as the weaker section of the society. In this paper attempts were made to examine and highlight the status of empowerment of women through Five Year Plans in India.

Keywords: women empowerment, social policy

Introduction

Empowerment is a word widely used but seldom defined. The term is being reduced to a jargon through overuse and lack of clarity. Empowerment literally means making someone powerful, facilitating the weak to attain strength, to increase one's self-esteem, to help someone to be assertive/self-confident, to enable someone to confront injustice and oppression and to support someone for his/her rights^[1]. Empowerment is the process by which oppressed persons gain some control over their own lives and involves in the matters, which affect them directly. It includes social, economic, psychological and political aspects^[2].

Women's empowerment has become a buzzword for academicians, activists, practitioners and politicians, and is very often heard in workshops, seminars and conferences at regional, national and international levels. Everybody talking of the new millennium and related issues consider women's empowerment issue as the most crucial one. It is believed that if women were given power to get them enlightened, the whole universe would become a much better place to live in. The future of women depends upon their struggle for their rights.

For centuries women in India are suffering due to discrimination, exploitation and exposed to various kinds of harassment at various levels. Women constitute nearly half of the total population of the country and therefore the development of the country is not possible without the development of this vast segment. Today the development of women has been a major concern for our planners and policy makers. After independence our planners have envisaged various constitutional provisions to protect the interest of women and undertaken various socio-economic development measures for their upliftment. In addition, various voluntary organizations are also being working hard for emancipation of women. Despite all these efforts by the Government as well as

voluntary bodies, still majority of women are deprived of their minimum rights^[3].

Research methodology

The study is based on secondary sources of data. The secondary sources like books, journals, magazines and articles have been examined for this study.

Women empowerment and five year plans

From 1947 to 2017 the Indian economy was premised on the concept of planning this was carried through the Five Year Plans, developed, executed, and monitored by the Planning Commission (1951-2014) and the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog (2015-2017). With the Prime Minister as the ex-officio Chairman, the commission has a nominated Deputy Chairman, who holds the rank of Cabinet Minister. Montek Singh Ahluwalia is the last Deputy Chairman of the Commission (resigned on 26th May 2014). The Eleventh Five Year Plan completed its term in March 2012 and the Twelfth Plan is currently underway^[4].

It is since the mid 1980s that this term became popular in the field of development, especially in reference to women. In India, it is the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85), which can be taken as a landmark for the cause of women. It is here that the concept of 'women and development' was introduced for the first time. It was realised that no more piecemeal strategies but an integrated approach would deliver the desired goods. The realistic and regenerative developmental efforts in the direction of progress, in terms of economic independence for women and educational advancement of them are what would answer the basic questions raised for empowering women^[5]. In the Five Year Plans major importance has been given to women. Various programmes and schemes made for women empowerment in various successive Five Year Plans are as follows:

First Five-Year Plan

Women's development began mainly as welfare oriented programme in the First Five-Year Plan (1951-56). To spearhead welfare measure, the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) was established in 1953, which symbolized the welfare approach to women's problems. This Board was also reflective of the community development approach, which envisaged for the first time, the need for organizing women into Mahila Mandals or Women's Clubs. Community development workers, worked closely with the rural elite. Rural women came within the purview of the Community Development Programmes^[6].

Second Five-Year Plan

The Second Five-Year Plan (1956-61) was closely linked with the overall approach of intensive agricultural development. The welfare approach to women's issues persisted. The plan organized women into Mahila Mandals to act as focal points at the grassroots levels for development of women. It recognized the need for the organization of women as workers. It perceived the social prejudices/ disabilities they suffered. The Plan stated that women should be protected against injurious work, should receive maternity benefits and crèches for children. It also suggested speedy implementation of the principle of equal pay for equal work and provision for training to enable women to compete for higher jobs^[7].

Third Five-Year Plan

The Third Five-Year Plan (1961-66) pinpointed female education as a major welfare strategy. In social welfare, the largest share was provided for expanding rural welfare services and condensed course of education. The health programme concentrated mainly on the provision of services for maternal and child welfare, health education, nutrition and family planning.

Fourth Five-Year Plan

The Fourth Five-Year Plan (1969-74) gave emphasis on women's education. The basic policy of this Plan was to promote women's welfare within the family as the base of operation. High priority was accorded to immunization of pre-school children and supplementary feeding for children, expectant and nursing mothers. During this period, Central Social Welfare Board adopted the following programmes for welfare of women.

1. Considered courses of education for adult women;
2. Socio-economic programmes^[8].

Fifth Five-Year Plan

The Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974-79), saw a shift in the approach for women's development from 'welfare' to 'development' to cope up with several problems of the family and the role of women.

The new approach aimed at an integration of welfare with development services. This plan emphasized the need to train women in need of income and protection. It also recommended a programme of functional literacy to equip women with skills and knowledge to reform the functions of housewife under the health programmes, the primary objective

was to provide minimum public health facilities integrated with family planning and nutrition for vulnerable groups, children, pregnant and lactating mothers^[9].

This plan coincided with the International Women's Decade and the submission of the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI), "Towards Equality". The overall task of the CSWI was to undertake a comprehensive examination of all the questions relating to the rights and status of women in the context of changing social and economic conditions in the country and problems relating to the advancement of women. The report stressed that the dynamics of social change and development had adversely affected a large section of women and had created new imbalances and disparities such as:

- i) The declining sex ratio;
- ii) Lower expectancy of life;
- iii) Higher infant and maternal mortality;
- iv) Declining work participation; and
- v) Illiteracy^[10].

Sixth Five-Year Plan

The Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980-85), marked a landmark in the history of women's development by including a separate chapter and adopting a multi-disciplinary approach with the three pronged thrust on health, education and employment. This Plan reviewed the status and situation of women in general and came to the conclusion that inspite of legal and constitutional guarantees; women had lagged behind men in all sectors. It stressed that the main strategy for women's development was three-fold education, employment and health. For the first time, it clearly spelt out that economic independence would accelerate improvement in the status of women and suggested the setting up of cells at the district level for increasing women's participation through self-employment. It also wanted the government to review the adequacy of the implementing machinery of various special legislations passed for the protection of women's right. It referred, as usual, to the need for increasing enrollment of the girls at the elementary level, thus encouraging the promotion of education for women in backward areas^[11].

Seventh Five-Year Plan

The Seventh Five-Year Plan (1985-90) operationalized the concern for equity and empowerment articulated by the International Decade for Women. During this Plan efforts were made to provide welfare measures to all sections of society especially the underprivileged section-the women. A significant step in this direction was to identify/promote the 'beneficiaries-oriented programmes' for women in different developmental sectors, which extend direct benefits to women. Women Mahila Mandals were established. Many Art and Craft centres were opened for women in order to enhance their employment opportunities. Support to Training-cum-Employment for Women (STEP) was launched in 1987 to strengthen the skills among women with a view to promote employment opportunities for women. Employment and income generating training-cum-production centres for women were started to train women in order to make them independent^[12].

Eighth Five-Year Plan

The Eighth Five-Year Plan (1992-97), which was launched in 1992, marked a shift from development to empowerment in approach to women development schemes. It promised to “ensure that the benefits of development from different sectors do not bypass women” and women must be enabled to function as equal partners and participants in the development process [13].

Ninth Five-Year Plan

The Ninth Five-Year Plan came into effect from April 1, 1997. In the approach paper, the focus is on, among the other things, empowerment of women and people’s participation in planning and implementation of strategies. An important objective in the approach paper is the empowerment of women. In planning process, empowerment at the outset, means choices for women and opportunities to avail of these choices. The supportive environment should be provided to women at all stages by the home, school, religion, government and work place. There is also a strong demand for vocational training for women. To enable women to participate outside the home, childcare services, hostels and affordable housing are essential. The Ninth Five-Year Plan is an attempt to bring in women’s issues within the policy making sphere [14].

Tenth Five-Year Plan

The Tenth Plan (2002-2007) has set certain monitorable targets for women. These are: The Swyamsidha programme, a recast version of the Indira Mahila Yojna, organizes women into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) for income generation activities. It also facilitates access to services such as literacy, health, non-formal education, water-supply etc. One of the basic principles of governance laid down in the United Progressive Alliance Government’s National Common Minimum Programme (NCMP) is to empower women politically, educationally, economically and legally. The Women’s Component Plan (WCP) involved efforts to ensure that not less than 30 percent of funds/benefits were earmarked for women under the various schemes of the women-related ministries/departments. Women are under-represented in the process of the formulation and implementation of the Plan itself. WCP seems an afterthought, simply added on to pre-existing development programmes and projects. The actual experiences of women in empowering themselves need to be first understood and those experiences used as a benchmark.

To make women’s grassroots political participation a living reality, they should be enabled to monitor and audit the various programmes and schemes at the level of Panchayat through a local committee. Given patriarchal domination and women’s consequent lack of an independent voice in decision-making, the elected women representatives to PRIs may be restrained in independently exercising their rights and fulfilling their duties. At every step, there is a need to increase the participation of women in the process of formulation and implementation of development planning so that gender equity issues are accounted for plans have a positive impact on women.

Eleventh Five-Year Plan

The Approach Paper to the Eleventh Plan (2007-2012) reads:

“An important divide which compels immediate attention relates to gender. Special, focused efforts made to purge society of this malaise by creating an enabling environment for women to become economically, politically and socially empowered”. However, past Plans have expressed similar concern with respect to the gender divide. The strategy for women is confined to three areas- violence against women, economic empowerment and women’s health. A major challenge before the 11th Plan was to enable the creation of an environment for women that is safe and free from violence. Regular campaigns of issues such as female foeticide, physical abuse, trafficking, gender discrimination and domestic violence may be organized. Finally, the 11th Plan recognised that a nation cannot be healthy unless its women are healthy. It strived to reduce the incidence of anemia and malnutrition among the adolescent girls to break the cycle of ill-health and infant mortality [15].

In a unique move, the government has constituted a committee of “feminist” economists to ensure gender sensitive allocation of public resources in the 11th Five Year Plan. Apart from identifying significant trends for women in economy and suggesting policy measures to integrate them into the growth agenda, the group looked at assessment standards being used to evaluate progress- both sector-wise and in micro-economic segments and offer suggestions which helped device more sensitive indicators to reflect gender issues [16].

Twelfth Five Year Plan

It is widely believed that men enjoy all the power and position; women were treated as second rate and lower human spheres. Twelfth Five Year Plan entitled as ‘Faster, Sustainable and More Inclusive Growth’. This plan had decided at the growth rate 8.2%. The Planning Commission is pushing for special dispensation for single woman, particularly those who are single by choice. Women participation in favour related work, both in agriculture and animal husbandry. In framing policies/schemes for the Twelfth Five Year Plan, the special needs of women must be taken due care of. The focus of the Twelfth Five Year Plan is on the health, education, urbanization and governance.

Conclusion

In nutshell, it can be compiled that the various welfare programmes adopted by government are meant to emancipate the women from social evils and cruelty. A special focus on the welfare of women was laid through Five Year Plans in India. Various programmes and policies have been made by the government for the development as well as empowerment of women. But still there are many areas of concern that governments need to pay attention towards uplift of women.

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