

INDIAN WOMEN

(RURAL LIFE, EDUCATION, ECONOMICS AND ENTERPRENEURIAL WORLD)

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The Rural life of women in India is tough beyond any comparison. Women from the landless families work as agricultural labourers during all the seasons and in various agricultural operations. This way, they put in 10-11 hours of work per day in the agricultural fields. In cash crops like potato, rice and cotton, in particular, female labour force is found to be high. The payment in grains during harvest of wheat and rice and cash for other crops form the major part of the resources for the family's survival. They also look after the cattle which brings them an extra income from sale of milk besides improving the dietary standards of the family. Apart from shouldering the responsibility of looking after the cattle, cleaning of cattle sheds and milking of cattle, many women work with men in 'homebased' work and provide any help required by their brothers and husbands. These tasks are performed along with the usual 'women's work' such as cooking, washing utensils and clothes and upbringing of children. Their work outside the home does not permit any change in the role expectations of the family and the males. All these multiple roles of women are supposed to be a part of their role as 'ideal mothers', 'ideal wife' and this deprives her right to an independent economic status. Further the culturally and socially defined role of woman is in direct conflict with her role as bread-winner' and it is customary for the woman not to seek gainful employment.

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Since social, cultural and familial constraints deprive women of their freedom and mobility in the outdoor activities, they are therefore only in small numbers in the organised sector. This forces them to accept whatever work is available within the village, denying them exposure to the outside world. This is due to the fact that women's roles and work as workers, are not considered to be primary. Also, they are pushed into the category of secondary workers like 'helpers' in spite of their hard labour and briskness (factors acknowledged even by the landowners) at work.

The landowning class prefers to employ more women as agricultural workers as they can be easily paid much less when compared with their input in terms of work. The women are employed for all types of agricultural work such as sowing, transplanting, weeding, leveling, picking, harvesting etc. They brave all severe climatic conditions like men in preharvest and post-harvest operations of rice and wheat. During peak seasons, female labour is in maximum demand and when the demand for labour decreases, it is the woman who has to face unemployment crisis. They, therefore, form the majority of the reserve force of labour. This way, their lives are one of continuous insecurity of employment within the village in the primary sector i.e. agriculture.

The women have also to bear the brunt of discrimination in wages. The principle of equal pay for equal work is not strictly adhered to in the fixation of wage rates for male and female labour in agriculture. A tendency prevails to exploit female labour because of their poor bargaining power and this fact lowers their dignity as labour.

In one of the villages, when the scheduled caste agricultural women workers demanded equal wages, they were pushed back to their homes. Unfortunately, these women did not have any other alternative except to get back to the work after a few months for their own and family's survival. According to a reliable source at the government sponsored Potato Research Institute in Punjab, women agricultural labourers are neither given permanent employment nor equal wages in the institute, whereas men are enrolled as permanent ones. Women are treated as casual labourers and are paid as much less as can be.

Since the strict socialization of a woman starts right from her early childhood to prepare and prove herself to be 'an ideal wife', 'an ideal woman' and 'an ideal homemaker', she is seldom encouraged for education and economic independence. These patriarchal attitudes and practices are reflected in the local folk songs and folk tales in the area. The woman is supposed to pass on her earnings to the male members in the family, who squander it either on gambling, and/or liquor thus leaving the 'wife or woman' totally powerless and helpless. This powerlessness and lack of control over her own earned income results in other evils like 'dowry', 'alcoholism', 'wifebeating', 'desertion' and they have to face limitless hardships. Very seldom, they can raise their voice against these evils.

Furthermore, the landowning women are hardworking but they generally work inside the home. Among the 'poor women' of upper castes like widows and those deserted, there is not tradition of working for wages in the agricultural fields and they have no alternative except to pursue upper caste occupations at home like weaving and spinning of cotton etc. They undergo lots of hardships in their lives to make both ends meet. All this happens due to lack of recognition and appreciation of women's work despite her long schedule from 4 a.m. in the morning till 11 p.m. at night. Since the cultural factors permit withdrawal of women from work, there is withdrawal from work outside the home as soon as the low caste family goes upon the class ladder and attains prosperity e.g. women whose husbands have gone to European countries or to the Middle East or have started working in the factories in the city or outside the state and earn a comparatively higher wage. In such cases, women are pressurised by their husbands and elder members of the family to confine themselves to their homes in order to emulate the ways of high caste women. Thus absence of economic independence combined with illiteracy of women not only maintains the status quo in the position of women but also results in the deterioration of their condition even though they contribute equally and even more to the family's income and survival.

The far more difficult and radical challenge that faces education systems all over the world today - is how to incorporate the women's dimension into the educational process?

As an education planner I was unaware of women's issues. As a product of an urban middle class family and a hybrid education of institutions (all urban) in India, I was even less aware

of rural women. As a first generation beneficiary of the equality clauses of the Indian Constitution, I accepted the facile theory that education and equal political rights would remove inequality for all women in time, not realising how the educational process itself was strengthening the hold of patriarchy and introducing new forces for inequality, subordination and marginalisation of women.

For nearly a decade, when I was preoccupied with discovering rural women, to identify their problems and needs, my colleagues and I found ourselves increasingly lapsing back from our researcher and teacher status to that of students and learners.

Our experience with the investigation of the Committee on the Status of Women in India had convinced us that we had a lot to unlearn, before we could contribute to new knowledge regarding women's situations and roles in our society. We began with the feeling that what we had learnt in our years of social science theories and research methodology in the academic profession, had, to a very great extent, been responsible for the invisibility of women's contribution, problems, and roles in earlier social science research in India. We attributed this failure to Eurocentric theories of social transformation, and tools and methods of research that we had borrowed from the West.

It was, therefore, a deliberate decision, to avoid starting with any assumptions or framework while beginning research on the situation of poor rural women in different parts of the country. We decided to expose ourselves as much as possible to the empirical reality rather than analytical approaches borrowed from any other part of world.

The Indian women's movement in its earlier phases had placed all its hopes on the issue of ensuring equal access for women to all types and levels of Education. However, the need to abolish sex-role stereotypes, by non-differentiation of curricula by gender was also addressed, and featured in Five Year Plan documents and the first National Policy Statement on Education adopted by Parliament in 1968. This stand rejected the practice of the Colonial Regime, and reflected the Constitutional guarantee that "the State shall not discriminate on grounds of sex".

But policy statements were not always implemented, especially in school education, where Home Science continued to be taught to girls only, and many girls' schools did not have arrangements for proper teaching of science and mathematics. In some states, boys were not permitted to take up fine arts. No one thought of introducing subjects like agriculture, animal husbandry or forestry in girls institutions. Even the Agricultural Universities, established on the model of Landgrant Colleges in the United States, did not encourage girls to enter such courses, but established Home Science Colleges within their campuses to attract rural girls.

In contrast to this, Indian Universities for general education threw open all their courses to women from the 19th century, using their autonomy to ignore the Raj's policy of discrimination. In the post-independence period, Indian Universities providing general education expanded enrollment of women in both arts and science courses, and the University Grants Commission followed a liberal policy in promoting science education in girls' colleges. This situation was, however, not reflected in the professional courses, except education and medicine.

The CSWI observed that from early childhood boys and girls were indoctrinated to accept gender inequality through a powerful socialisation process and "The only institution which could counteract the effect of this process is the education system. If education is to promote equality for women, it must make a deliberate, planned and sustained effort so that the new values of equality of the sexes can replace the traditional value system of inequality.

The educational system today has not even attempted to undertake this responsibility. In fact, the schools reflect and strengthen the traditional prejudices of inequality through curricula, the classification of subjects on the basis of sex and the unwritten code of conduct enforced on the public."

In the case of developing countries particularly, intervention for women's equality and development, whether prompted by government or other agencies, always has to contain a hard core of educational, information gathering, communicational and training activities. It is impracticable to expect bureaucracy to play this role. NGOs concerned with women's

issues in these countries are mostly based in urban areas, and lack both human and financial resources to undertake all the tasks that are involved - research, communication, mobilisation, training, obtaining resource support, even legal and political support in some cases. Nor do many such organisations exist in all developing countries. But educational institutions, of varied quality, have come to exist in most parts of the developing world. They do possess some of the skills, the infrastructural support, and above all the human resources to play this role.

In a country like India, another argument to introduce this concept into the Education Policy was the public accountability of most educational institutions. Not all the NGOs are committed to women's equality. Fundamentalist conservatism has also promoted NGOs, as they have promoted some educational institutions also. But the latter are more exposed to public scrutiny than the former.

If education is to become an active agent for ending gender inequality, it requires a new perspective, new methods and tools, and new knowledge - (a) about the centrality of women's role to correct the peasant iniquitous and destructive path of development; and (b) about the origin of women's subordination in society. It is the contention of this paper that the key to these two critical issues lie in the past and contemporary histories of rural women, to a far greater extent than in the experiences of their counterparts in urban areas, because one finds far clearer gender differentials in the assessment of problems, priorities, values and demands in rural than in urban areas in developing countries.

Fifty years after independence, only a little more than a third of women are literate, is indicative of the overall attitude towards women and their roles. In addition, in keeping with the world-wide trend on exposing such data, information on violence against Indian women and girl children has brought into focus their extremely fragile position, both within the family and in public spaces. Yet, there has been slow progress in certain vital areas: female life expectancy at birth has risen, the sex differential in infant Mortality Rates is almost bridged, and an increasing number of women are joining the work force. The chief achievements of the last decade - and certainly among the most important features of the postindependence period - have been the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1993

which reserved 331/3 percent of seats for women in elections to local bodies in both the rural and urban areas.

The outcome has been a virtual revolution in the political scenario of independent India: it is estimated that when elections are completed in the states of the Indian union where the Amendments are applicable, over 1 million women will have been elected to these local bodies.

However, clearly traditional holders of power are unhappy with this shift in focus: a recent report from Rajasthan, a state notorious for negative female development indicators, quoted two women sarpanches or heads of Panchayats (village level elected bodies) as saying that they had been impeached by the male majority because of resentment against their development-oriented plans and drive against corruption. In other words, the patriarchal order will resist what it feels are invasions of its bastions of power and authority.

Against this backdrop, it becomes important to assess how drastic economic reforms will affect women's lives and well-being. In other words, the paper argues that State policies and programmes are for and about people: however, given the irrevocable mandate of globalisation on the one hand and internal economic decline on the other, it has at times been all too easy for the Indian State to concentrate mainly on overall strategies to face such challenges.

In the process, blueprints for progress often overlook the claims of those negatively affected by such changes. It is then left to the voices of dissent to narrate a cautionary tale: the democratic polity represents an increasingly aware electorate, one which is not only concerned with individual rights but which also has certain expectations from a State poised to enter the global economy. For, if political structures are to endure they have to move beyond the narrow confines of contractual relationships. The following analysis of health care in India shows how the State has not taken into account the implications of its policies; in fact, by encouraging privatisation of health care - often as we shall see, by default - it is reneging on its contract with its citizens: far from an ethics of care, the Indian State is

increasingly adopting a minimalist position as it labours to keep at bay divisive forces and growing discontent.

At the time of independence from the British in 1947, India was "a low productivity agrarian economy". The newly elected government adopted a mixed economy approach: while the public or government sector was to handle major responsibilities such as power, steel, mines and heavy industries, food grain production, the manufacture of consumer goods as well as some capital goods were controlled by private enterprise. The mixed economy philosophy and Five Year Plans defined priorities and allocations maintained through an elaborate system of licensing and quality control which regulated the latter. By the seventies it was clear that economic policies had not been able to contain inflation nor deliver social justice: if the low rate of growth, spiralling inflation and impending balance of payments crisis had to be tackled, a fresh look at existing strategies and programmes was necessary.

In the years before the current phase of reform, there was enough evidence to suggest that poverty alleviation measures were not taken too seriously. Economist Pranab Bardhan has commented that while there was "some general progress over the years in the provision of public consumption and welfare measures for the poor", these remained woefully inadequate.

He identified low investments, the absence of an adequate administrative machinery as well as organisational and managerial bottlenecks as being responsible. Further, during a financial crisis, "the axe falls most heavily on the social welfare programmes for the poor". That, in the post-independence period, investment and planning for the social sector has not been given the attention necessary for a country of India's size and dynamics is evident by a quick look at some figures: half a century after independence 130 million people in India do not have access to any kind of health facilities, 185 million have no access to drinking water and while the government claims that 80 per cent of villages have safe drinking water, a million children die each year from diarrhoeal diseases .

While by the mid-eighties there was a re-thinking on economic policies, it was the crisis of 1990-91 which "shook the very foundations of Indian development strategy and planning". According to the authors, the crisis was triggered by the, Gulf War when, due to a number of factors, including a drying up of foreign remittances from the Middle East, the country's foreign exchange reserves shrank to "the value of a single month's import bill". However, others feel that the situation was in fact in the making due to a faulty import policy and other related factors brought about by political exigencies.

With few other options, the country approached the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank for "extraordinary accommodation"; the funding institutions, in turn, made stabilisation and structural Adjustment conditional for the receipt of such assistance. Most official documents in the fifty years of India's independence have, with 'varying degrees of candour, admitted to limited success in bridging the gap in the population's access to basic rights such as education, health, nutrition, housing, sanitation and so on. Nor has civil society been silent on the declining role of the State: for instance, from 1975 onwards, the women's movement has drawn attention to certain negative socio-economic trends and how these affect the status of women and children. The many voices from the women's movement as well as from other broad-based people's movements fractures the, discourse on liberalisation by providing counterpoints and critical appraisals of avowed promises and preferred solutions.

Accordingly, we examine the health sector with a view to highlighting myopic policies and faulty implementation strategies. By doing so we hope to contribute to an alternative discourse, one which questions the votaries of liberalisation, their expectations of the market, trickle-down theories of development and naive belief that the social sector can take care of itself.

The educated women do not want to limit their lives in the four walls of the house. They demand equal respect from their partners. However, Indian women have to go a long way to achieve equal rights and position because traditions are deep rooted in Indian society where the sociological set up has been a male dominated one. Women are considered as weaker sex and always made to depend on men folk in their family and outside, throughout their life. The Indian culture made them only subordinates and executors of the decisions made by other male members, in the basic family structure. While at least half the brainpower on earth belongs to women, women remain perhaps the world's most underutilized resource. Despite all the social hurdles, India is brimming with the success stories of women. They stand tall from the rest of the crowd and are applauded for their achievements in their respective field. The transformation of social fabric of the Indian society, in terms of increased educational status of women and varied aspirations for better living, necessitated a change in the life style of Indian women. She has competed with man and successfully stood up with him in every walk of life and business is no exception for this. These women leaders are assertive, persuasive and willing to take risks. They managed to survive and succeed in this cut throat competition with their hard work, diligence and perseverance. Ability to learn quickly from her abilities, her persuasiveness, open style of problem solving, willingness to take risks and chances, ability to motivate people, knowing how to win and lose gracefully are the strengths of the Indian women entrepreneurs.

Women Entrepreneurs may be defined as the women or a group of women who initiate, organize and operate a business enterprise. The Government of India has defined women entrepreneurs as an enterprise owned and controlled by women having a minimum financial interest of 51 per cent of the capital and giving at least 51 per cent of the employment generated in the enterprise to women. Women entrepreneurs engaged in business due to push and pull factors which encourage women to have an independent occupation and stands on their own legs. A sense towards independent decision-making on their life and career is the motivational factor behind this urge. Saddled with household chores and domestic responsibilities women want to get independence. Under the influence of these factors the

women entrepreneurs choose a profession as a challenge and as an urge to do some thing new. Such a situation is described as pull factors. While in push factors women engaged in business activities due to family compulsion and the responsibility is thrust upon them.

The glass ceilings are shattered and women are found indulged in every line of business. The entry of women into business in India is traced out as an extension of their kitchen activities, mainly 3P's, Pickle, Powder and Pappad. But with the spread of education and passage of time women started shifting from 3P's to modern 3E's i.e., Energy, Electronics and Engineering. Skill, knowledge and adaptability in business are the main reasons for women to emerge into business ventures. Women Entrepreneur' is a person who accepts challenging role to meet her personal needs and become economically independent. A strong desire to do something positive is an inbuilt quality of entrepreneurial women, who is capable of contributing values in both family and social life. With the advent of media, women are aware of their own traits, rights and also the work situations. The challenges and opportunities provided to the women of digital era are growing rapidly that the job seekers are turning into job creators. Many women start a business due to some traumatic event, such as divorce, discrimination due to pregnancy or the corporate glass ceiling, the health of a family member, or economic reasons such as a layoff. But a new talent pool of women entrepreneurs is forming today, as more women opt to leave corporate world to chart their own destinies. They are flourishing as designers, interior decorators, exporters, publishers, garment manufacturers and still exploring new avenues of economic participation.

To enable women to participate economically and socially in an effective manner requires certain pre-conditions. First, women need to articulate their own feelings, fears, needs, potential to the intervening group who must share their problems and inspire confidence in them to organise unitedly. Formation of grassroot organisations like Mahila Mandals, Cooperatives could initially provide an effective answer and solution. Through such organisations, it is possible to launch an organised activity. Grassroot organisations

sponsored by the central and state developmental agencies have been in existence for quite a long time, yet these have yielded very limited results owing to the failure to recognise and measure adequately women worker's contribution in the society and national economy. Rather, women have been viewed in development in a very narrow perspective at national level and gradually it has percolated to the state and the district levels also.

In view of the above, all these developmental programmes of women require a change in the focus on women's problems, women's interests, approach to women's work and better livelihood of rural women workers and thereby strengthening women's organisations. Experience has shown that these organisations in order to be strengthened at various levels for sustained improvement need initiatives by intervening agencies which can serve as channels of communication and support between the developmental machinery and the rural women. The intervening groups through their participatory approach can build an information base and provide the models of innovative initiatives. Their experiences can enable them to learn some lessons which can sharpen the understanding for the people working for planning strategies and policies.