



RESHAPING TOMORROW: WOMEN'S VOLUNTARY EFFORTS AS AGENTS OF GENDER JUSTICE

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The concept of gender justice can only be realized in a society which is based upon the ideas of equality and fairness, in which the state can provide a decent standard of living to the people at the maximum and protect the interests of the marginalized and deprived group. The focus of the paper is to address the gender justice within the contemporary lived realities of people especially women. Within the families, women and children have to struggle against violence, abandonment, destitution, denial of property rights, and other forms of discrimination.

Gender justice is closely related with the way women are conceptualized and the gender relations are perceived, the way women's roles and images are projected and the way their issues are articulated. The constitution of India explicitly recognizes the claim of gender justice in preamble, in the provisions of fundamental rights and in the directive principles of the state policy. Identifying women as among the most backward sections of the society and acknowledging their marginalization in the society, making preferential policies for them has been made mandatory by the constitution¹. Along with the constitutional provisions, progressive laws have been made from time to time which aim at improving the legal status of women. Such laws include The Hindu marriage Act of 1955; Hindu succession Act 1956; The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act 1956; Dowry Prohibition Act 1961; Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971; Equal Remuneration Act 1973; The Indecent Representation of women [Prohibition] Act 1986; and Commission on Sati Prohibition Act 1981, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005 etc. An attempt has also been made during Five Year plans to work towards the betterment of women's position. A particular emphasis on improving the conditions of less privileged and weaker sections of the society especially through the provision of education and employment has always been a part of the planned provisions. Even the philosophy of empowerment for XI plan is inclusive and integrated economic, political and social



empowerment with gender justice. Of course, few urbanized, educated and economically independent women have been apparently brought at par with men but the change has not changed the power equation in the society.

Despite all these measures aimed at providing gender justice to women, the concept still remains distant dream for majority of women. They are still the backward, oppressed and suppressed members of the society. Available statistics on the various social indices like sex ratio. Education, health, political participation, decision making, employment and crime against women clearly reveal the situation of women in India is not very promising. Though it seems that women are educated in large numbers as their literacy rate has increased by 10% between 2001 and 2011. Similar is the situation about education which is considered as an asset and creates a sense of awareness among people about their rights and discrimination prevalent at various levels. In case of women the access to education is far from the governmental claims. In the prevailing circumstances, it is obvious that illiteracy and ignorance are some of the major factors leading to women's continued deprivation. Removal of economic inequality is one of step by which just social order can be attained in the society. Here, again women are the worst sufferers. There has been steady decline in female labour work force participation rate despite the enhanced economic activity. World bank says that the share of India women above the age of 15 employed in the work force is only one fourth. It was 34% in 1991 and has been sliding steadily since. The data shows substantial growth rate of women as marginal workers indicating that women are being pushed towards relatively inferior jobs as compared to those held by men. Women account for 32% of the workforce in the informal economy, including 20% of the non agricultural workforce. About 118 million women are engaged in the unorganized sector in India which make them the most vulnerable and the poorest.

In spite of the existing laws, steps taken by the government, there is an upward trend in the crime against women. They are killed daily in sobering numbers. Various institutional mechanisms like family courts, special police cells, mehilla lok adalats, apart from the NCW, have been set up though most lack the teeth effectively to contain this violence. A major stumbling block is the tendency of the police to treat the violence. The crime like rape, molestation, domestic violence etc. have been on the rise but it is the



nature of common place crime which are devaluating the women most. Although, there exists the Child Marriage Act 1978, but the practice of child marriage continues unabated in Rajasthan, Bihar and other states. Although, female infanticide is not a common all India practice, yet such cases still do take place in various parts of the country. Similarly, in spite of Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques [Regulation and prevention of misuse] Act 1994, thousands of clinics with facilities of carrying out Pre-natal sex-determination test are still operating throughout the country. What is peculiar about the data provided by National Crime Record Bureau, is the rate of total crime in 2011 reported a decrease by 7.4% while that against women increased by 7.1% in 2010.

Women's question in terms of their equal and dignified status, as a respectable member of the society has been placed on the priority level all over the world since 70's. Conscious raising projects have been persisting ever since 1975 when the International Year of women was celebrated. The International decade for Women 1975-85 and four U.N. World Conferences for women helped to raise the visibility of women's question. This worldwide awakening has not left Indian women unaffected. The report of the committee on the status of women in India, for the first time highlighted the women's vulnerability and discrimination prevailing at various spheres. The women's decade has helped Indian women to think seriously upon diverse issues of fundamental concerns of different sections of women. They have started perceiving themselves as a disadvantaged and discriminated group. A number of women have initiated organized efforts though mostly at local levels to prevent oppression, exploitation, sexual harassment and domestic violence felt by their gender. Recognizing the importance of voluntary action for social upliftment of a section of society, an analysis of women's initiatives at the grass root levels is undertaken.

It was way back in early 70's that about twenty four women came together with a demand to regularise their wages and formed a 'self-employed women's association' (SEWA). This association wage a successful struggle against social injustice and women like paper pickers, vegetable vendors, labourers and beedi workers became its main protagonists. The basic essence of SEWA, a unique contemporary women's labour union, is based on the assumption that, 'They are women' they are self-employed and they are poor'. SEWA not only strive for changing socially and structurally working women's lives but make



an effort to that these women are completely accepted in the present social context. SEWA organised All Women's co-operatives in rural and urban areas including production services and banking co-operatives. It has opened its own bank; it started its maternal protection scheme for pregnant women; it has a provision of giving meagre amount as a stipend and one k.g Ghee during delivery. This is one of the organisation where women themselves are their leaders, they can decide their own future and try to find solutions to the problems they face collectively.

The establishment of Manushi (A journal about women in society) focusing women's issues was one of the earliest attempt of women's voluntary action to fight on their own through print media during late 70's. this journal identify the issues and problems confronted by women in their day to day lives in various parts of the country. It focuses mainly on the lives of rural women. It was a sort of movement in itself as it covers the concrete realities of women's lives and deals with specific events and issues related to them. Kali for Women is also India's first feminist publishing house. It is an anthology of english language writings. The main aim of this publishing house is to promote Indian women's writings. Moreover, it is devoted to more serious and academic subjects.

It is assumed that the main cause of gender injustice, existing discrimination, harassment, and exploitation is the ignorance of law. Parliament has enacted certain laws but unawareness especially among the victims of discrimination has reduced its effect. Recognising this reality, various welfare agencies have started functioning in this field. Department of Women and Child development in collaboration with the voluntary organisation -Multiple Action Research Group prepared a series of 10 booklets to educate rural and semi-literate women about the basic provisions of law made for them. This organisation has provision to release this booklet in all major Indian languages to make it more effective. Efforts to improve women's image has also been extended at the local level. For example, Ahmedabad Women's Action Group (AWAG) took the initiative against sexist bias in the media, although it was formally established in 70's, yet it started functioning during mid 80's. this organisation raises voices against gender bias in text books. Analysing X class SSC text books, it raises the following objection: women are usually presented as emotional and sentimental beings on the one hand and sacrificing and submissive on the



other; the customs of sati and johar are eulogised; no reference of women is found in text books of maths; even a science text book ignored women's existence. These objections gained positive response from the Managing board and resulted in modifications and deleting of those passages which deteriorate the image of women. This organisation also continues its struggle against the portrayal of women through the stage plays and creates awareness among the people. In Andhra Pradesh, women's group set up grain banks to preserve the traditional seeds in order to attain self-sufficiency. The project successfully working in many villages has enabled women graduates from being farm workers to become managers of the land. In Bodh-Gaya, in a working clan's [labours and tenants] struggle against absentee landlords, women asserted their right to land. They demanded that land should belong to their own name and in some villages they succeeded in accepting their demand. In Gujarat, alternative organizations are being created for helping women workers to cope with the effects of structural adjustment policies. It was the result of active women's participation that arrack was made an electoral issue with any implications and turned into political one. Women compelled the politicians to add this issue in election manifesto. They drew attention to the devastation caused by the arrack which makes a hell of their lives and ultimately they won. It was because of their efforts that arrack has also been banned by the government of Andhra Pradesh.

The aggressive role of women in the Chipko Movement is also worth noticing when they resisted contractor's attempt to felling of tress. Women are also fighting against their displacement due to occurrence of development projects like construction of dams. Women have taken the lead roles in the major struggle against development projects like the struggle against Sardar Sarovar Project, the struggle against Maheshwar dam, in Tehri etc. Even in major struggles against projects like Baliapal, Netarhat and Enron power projects women took lead roles. The most celebrated protest movement against big dams so far in the country has centered on the mega Sardar Sarovar project. A number of protest groups gathered under the charismatic leadership of activist Medha Patkar. Displacement disrupts crucial social and cultural linkage. It has adverse impact on migrated people, especially for women who are severely exploited by contractors and have to face adjustment problems. It has been stated by the Minister of the State for Water Resources that 20 million people has



been displaced since independence out of which only five million have received some compensation and rehabilitation. This meant that over 7.5 million women who have been displaced had been victimized by the trauma and violence of displacement. In Orissa, participation of women in resistance movements against development induced displacement is remarkable in case of the Ib valley Coal Mining Project. The women of Koddimunda village being displaced by the project took a leading role in a non violent struggle against the authority, the Mahanaddi Coalfields Limited (MCL) a subsidiary of coal India limited and succeeded in winning better rehabilitation benefits. The Women with the support of men stopped mining operations for three to four days.

Women's voluntary action against crimes like rape has resulted in national level campaign e.g. in Mathura Rape case, when Supreme Court has acquitted two policemen involving in the rape of minor tribal girl. Women's Group Initiative later led to significant changes in the Evidence Act. The December 2012 Nirbhaya Rape case has generated widespread outrage and protests and paved the way for opening up critical public discussion on pervasive violence against women in the country. Even the public pressure forced the government to fast tract the investigation which culminated in the Criminal Law (amendment) Act 2013.

Today women's concern is not limited to their fight against crimes; it is extended at various fronts like health, ecology, development content, use of resources etc. Individual women from different sectors also made effort in the way of gender justice. The renowned author and social activist, Arundhati Roy, is actively involved in advocating for human rights, environmental justice, and social equality. Her efforts focused on issues such as displacement due to development projects and the rights of marginalized communities. A prominent social activist, Medha Patkar, led the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Movement) which aimed to protect the rights of displaced communities due to the construction of dams on the Narmada River. Her activism drew attention to the issues of rehabilitation and displacement.

Kiran Bedi, India's first female Indian Police Service (IPS) officer, made significant contributions to police reforms and prison management. She introduced various innovative programs in Tihar Jail that aimed to rehabilitate prisoners through education and vocational



training. An acid attack survivor, Lakshmi Agarwal, became an advocate for the rights of acid attack victims. She founded an organization called Stop Acid Attacks, which raised awareness about the issue, provided support to survivors, and campaigned for stricter laws against acid attacks. Sunitha Krishnan is a social activist who has been working relentlessly to combat human trafficking and sexual exploitation. She co-founded Prajwala, an organization that rescues and rehabilitates victims of trafficking, providing them with education, vocational training, and support. Aruna Roy, a former civil servant turned social activist, played a key role in advocating for transparency and accountability in governance. She was instrumental in the implementation of the Right to Information Act, which empowers citizens to access government information. Besides her acting career, Shabana Azmi is known for her social activism. She has been an advocate for women's rights, child rights, and education. She is involved in various initiatives aimed at improving the condition of marginalized communities. These women, among many others, made substantial contributions to various aspects of Indian society through their voluntary actions.

The aforesaid examples of women's voluntary activities in the direction of social justice pertaining to their gender, emphasizes the fact that the very strategy of attaining gender justice needs to be changed. The specific context of social practices prevailing in India makes it clear that gender justice can not be aimed at merely through the initiative of the state. While efforts are being made to bring about changes from above, the response of the community of women is also essential. Their role in the politics of protest and resistance is very much required for the just society. These protest may not aim at changing the total structure of the society but their importance lies in the spontaneity and response to women. It is only women's mobilization that the potential to lead to their emancipation. Lastly it can be said that the failure of state initiated policies need rethinking. Unless the targeted group requiring the advantage of such policies is mobilized, the state action may remain ritualistic and hollow. The State acting from above must be complemented with the initiative at the local levels.



Notes and References

1. Article 14 clause 3 of Fundamental Rights clearly state, 'Nothing in this article shall prevent the state from making any special provision for women...' the preamble declaring Justice-social, economic and political and directive principles of state policy embodying the concept of a welfare state also aim at uplifting the women. According to Article 38, it is the duty of the state, 'to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice-social, economic and political shall inform all the institutions of the national life'.it has also been perceived that state policy should be directed towards securing adequate means of living to both men and women and provisions for equal pay for equal work for both of them.

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