CHAPTER - V
WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING PROCESS

The fight against inequality and commodification of women in society has been the cornerstone of discussions on feminism. Since women have multiple identities based on gender, looks, caste, class, ethnicity and age, at any given point of time they could be oppressed by any one or various other factors. In fact, women have been pushed to lag behind men on all vital aspects of life whether it is the choice of education, or employment opportunities, health and nutrition, sexuality or even crucial decisions about their family. A corrective to this situation would be ensuring for them a right to education and gainful employment and also empowering them through self-help groups besides providing them enough opportunities of participation at all levels of governance.

These rights would not only increase their self image and self-confidence but also provide for greater autonomy within the household along with the question of survival with men on an equal footing.

Rising atrocities on women all over the world is a matter of grave concern in our times. Despite being highly eulogized and venerated, women have all along been subjected to inferior status as compared to men all over the world. Although they are equal to men in all respects except brute physical force yet they have always been treated as unequal thereby deteriorating the quality heir life right from birth up to the end of life that is why the concept of ‘gender’ has been much publicized theme of discussions in present times as to how to empower women to attain all accomplishments of life as men do have
and to improve quality of their life so that they may realize their own self. The fight against inequality and commodification of women in society has been the cornerstone of such discussions on feminism. According to Catharine Mackinnon, women are walking embodiments of men’s projected needs and are reduced to attractiveness to men and sexual availability on male terms.\(^1\) Family structures in developing countries like India, manifest and perpetuate the subordinate status of women as there are several hidden social constraints that restrain their free choice to fulfill their desires. Customs and traditions determine the behaviour and social interaction and often they internalize the traditional conception of their role as natural, thereby inflicting an injustice upon themselves. Also, poverty is an overarching factor and a reality of life for a vast majority of women in India and abroad. This would increase their direct participation in the community activities and mainstream politics leading them on to wider horizons free from the forces of market commodity and patriarchy today. There is a growing awareness of the rights and the rightful role of women in society and the polity. The challenge of the new millennium is to concretize these developments in real terms not only in our country but also in the whole world by politically empowering women and ensuring a qualitative improvement in their lives by forcefully crushing the attempt of market and patriarchal forces that seek to treat women as commodity and propagate a dogmatized impression that a woman is a sexual/sensual being whose worth lies in her appealing beauty to attract men. Further in this context, their empowerment through self-help groups would effectively benefit not only individual women and women groups but also their families and also community as a whole through organized and collective effort for development because these groups have a common perception of need and an impulse
towards united endeavour for their common ends. Of all the strategies to empower women on these complex issues, an effective starting point is one that is defined by the concerned women themselves, especially when they belong to the poorer sections of the society.

This article traces the contextualizes and reductionisms views associated with the question of empowerment of women in its historical setting in India as well as in the world which may help in evolving a more empirical, realistic and therefore a more objective understanding of women’s status. Most of the literature on women in our country “inadvertently makes for grim reading- narratives of patriarchal exclusion. We come across few glaring facts like declining sex ratios, sex-selective abortion, a neglect of the girl child when it comes to their education and nutrition, early marriage, multiple pregnancies, discrimination in matters of inheritance and property rights and invisible ceiling in the job market. It is thus not surprising that the rare woman who breaks through these multiple barriers and leaves a mark on society tends to be iconised”.

MYTH AND HISTORY

Here it would be quite pertinent to go through the mythic realities of “panch-kanyas-Ahilya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari-who are regarded individually or even collectively as role models for the new Hindu bride”.

“Venerated for their strict abstinence and sacrifice, it is very hard to accept their traditional role as to be compliant and subservient, even when exploited and humiliated. Even agni-pareeksha of Sita in Ram Charita Manas of Tulsidas (but here as an earthly creature and not as a deity) negate the essence of freedom
of womanhood vis-à-vis man. But there are exceptions too which make for few unconventional and uncommon renderings of women like Satyawati and Kunti. They have succeeded in subverting the rigidities of caste order. Satyawati, the mother of the great Sage Ved Vyas, was a fisher girl, i.e., low caste, and afterwards marries Shantanu as she had a premarital relation with Sage Parashar. She not only deprives Devbrata, Shantanu’s first born, of the throne of Hastinapur, but when her own sons die childless, arranges ‘niyoga’ for the daughters-in-law to keep alive the family line. For this purpose she invites, not a high caste Kashtriya or Brahmin, but the mixed caste Vyasa, her first born issue from Sage Parashar. Rarely it is realized that premier the clan of mythic India, the Kuruvansha that traces its lineage from the moon, reflects a subverted caste order due to machinations of Satyawati. Given the symbolic space myths occupy in our society and consciousness, such unconventional renderings remain an exception”.

In fact if we go through the history of the world “the attitudes and atmosphere of prejudice and neglect towards women remain same throughout ages. They are neglected right since their childhood which is usually linked to a lower status for them as women. Many girls are raised in an environment of neglect, overwork and often abuse just because of being a female. In many countries girls are fed less than their brothers, forced to work harder, provided a little education and denied equal access to medical care. They are married off earlier and face greater risks of death in adolescence and early childhood because of early and too closely spaced pregnancies. Even tragic abandonment of women’s issues in all major revolutions and movements has become the bane of our civilization”. Even the French Revolution which made
epoch making by fighting for liberty, equality and fraternity did not speak in favour of upliftment of women. The great philosopher Rousseau had strangely advocated that “Ignorance was entirely beneficial for women” and also pleaded for their exclusion from politics. His General Will favoured a subordinate status for women’s will to the will of men. His ideas were later enshrined in the Declaration of the Rights of Men adopted in 1789 after the success of the French Revolution which promised rights of only men and non-slaves and excluded women. Thus this historic event paved the way for one sided evolution of democracy and freedom. Afterwards women were given equality in all spheres because they struggled hard for their rightful place in society. Despite these, the biased attitude towards women still forbids their participation in higher echelons of decision making in France and elsewhere in the world. They are even denied fundamental rights vital for their development in many parts of the world as clearly underlined by the Inter Parliamentary Symposium on the Participation of Women in the Political and Parliamentary Decision-making Process held in Geneva in 1989. “The political space belongs to all citizens; politics is everybody’s business and affects lives of each of us there is no doubt that the more women are associated, in numbers corresponding to their percentage of the population, in the political decision making process, in parties, in elected bodies in government and in international bodies, the more they can be associated with this process as protagonists and the more they can challenge the modalities and outcomes of politics. Only then will be concept of democracy find concrete and tangible expression. Indeed, it has been underscored that democracy and the participation of women go hand in hand and promote each other mutually.”

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A study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), in 1993 shows that there were only 3626 women legislators in the world out of a total of 35884 parliamentarians thereby constituting only 10.10 per cent. A recent study in this regard by the IPU in 2003 puts this figure at 6133 out of 42012 parliamentarians constituting 15.1 per cent of the members of the national parliaments. Despite several women movements and outcry for their empowerment and also growing international awareness, there is only marginal increase in the percentage of women parliamentarians in the last decade.

**POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN THE WORLD**

Any discussion of political empowerment of women presupposes their education, health, work participation, and exposure to media whereby women gain autonomy and status—both important aspects of their empowerment. Education undoubtedly contributes to development because it provides access to knowledge, skills, jobs and participation in society. Female literacy rate has a positive impact on health, marriage, birth and even death rate. According to Seth, “the productive and creative energies of the women of India have to be released through creative and sound education. This would be the key to their empowerment”. Nonetheless what is significant in this context is the fact emerging political will all over the world to have more women in public life. “Traditionally, Nordic countries have the highest number of women in Parliament. In Sweden alone women now account for 45.3 per cent of parliamentarians in the Swedish Riksadagen. This trend is now visible even in *Burqa* clad women society of Arab countries. In Morcco, women now account for 10.8 per cent of the lower house: a 10 per cent leap. This happened because a quota of 30 seats in Parliament has been introduced. In Bahrain,
women are now able to vote and also context in elections. Also in Djibouti a new law stipulates that every party has to present at least 10 per cent of candidates of both sexes. As a result, in the Parliamentary elections of 2003, seven women were elected to Parliament accounting for more than 10 per cent of the newly elected parliamentarians. Again in Jordan, electoral law was amended to reserve six seats for women in the Lower House of the Majlis. Indonesia has already passed a Bill stipulating that at least 30 per cent parliamentary candidates must be women. Although this progress may seem to be marginal, yet the growing presence of women in parliaments of the world is certainly a positive trend towards their empowerment. In fact this slow progress would not look to be really slow if we consider the fact that the right to vote and be elected was achieved by women after a hard effort of almost a century. New Zealand was the first country to grant the voting rights to women in 1893 and Finland, for the first in 1906 granted the right to contest election to women. By the end of the 20th Century, more than 95 per cent of the countries in the world have granted the women the two most fundamental democratic rights: the equal rights of women and men to vote was specifically proclaimed on in 1952 in the convention of the Political Rights of Women. Article-1 of this convention proclaims that, women shall be entitled to vote in all elections on equal terms with men, without any discrimination. This was reaffirmed in Article 4 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 1967. Again in 1979, the Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women, had provided that states “shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies.
b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation there of and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government; and

c) To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.  

But these rights were not easily obtained. Women had to fight tooth and nail and advocate for their rights at various fora. During the discussion on UN Charter for its adoption the women participants fought very hard as the draft of the Charter did not mention the phrase “the equal rights of men and women and nor did it prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex. As a result of severe loud protests by the women delegates, the UN Charter had to incorporate the idea of gender equality and thus UN Charter became the first ever, international document in the world to emphasise the equal rights of all human beings irrespective of gender. Similarly such references like “All men are brothers” were also changed to underline the essential equality of men and women”. This ongoing struggle for empowerment of women and also for human rights reached the high point in the World Conference of Women held in Beijing in 1995, when it adopted the historic declaration that “Women’s rights are human rights”. The historic significance of this declaration lies in the fact that it accords the status of equality for women which was not available in the Declaration of Rights of men and Citizens of 1789 and the American Declaration of Independence because both these declarations were confined to the civil and political rights of men.
POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

During the freedom struggle in India Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi and other progressive leaders like Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Dyayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekanand, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, etc. advocated for gender equality in a wider perspective of reforming the socio-economic and political conditions prevalent in those days. It was in 1920 when Sarojini Naidu and Margaret Cousins demanded equal rights of representation for women in provincial legislatures in India. Before this in 1917, Mahatma Gandhi had expressed: “Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of man, and she has the same right to freedom and liberty as he has.” In fact, the social condition of women was very pitiable those days and it was basically due to the deliberate effort of the leadership, at the forefront of the freedom struggle, that women fought against the might of the British empire along with men. Perhaps Bal Gangadhar Tilak, for the first time vigorously advocated that political action of women would be independent of their social status which he derived from his visit to Burma in 1899. Tilak found that though the social order in Burma was very favourable to women yet their political participation was very low, and this strengthened his view that political action was separate from and more important than social reform for empowerment of women.

With the onset of Independence our Constitution paved the way for a new age of equality for the women of India as it guaranteed equal political right including the right to vote to women. Almost all the provisions contained in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women are there in the Constitution of India and there is even a provision for
positive discrimination in their favour which is clearly manifested in Article 15 (3) of the Constitution of India. Several other articles underline the basic equality between men and women. Article 14 provides for equality before law. Article 39 (a) states that the State shall direct its policy towards securing equally to men and women the right to an adequate means of livelihood, and 39 (b) enjoins the State to direct its policy towards securing equal pay for equal work for both men and women. Article 42 provides for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief and Article 51 (e) refers to the fundamental duty of citizens to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

So far several women have occupied important political and administrative posts in India after Independence. Late Indira Gandhi, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Hansa Mehta and Sareefa Hamid Ali and recently Najma Heptulla and many more held top positions and many others continue to do so but their participation in the political decision making process is not in proportion to their population. Despite having equal rights with men to vote and content elections, their number in Parliament has been very small. In the 13th Lok Sabha there were only 49 women members out of total present membership of 543 which constitutes only 9.02 per cent of total membership. Again in the Rajya Sabha there were only 25 women out of total membership of 245, thereby constituting only 10.02 per cent of total membership.

The low representation of women in politics has been a driving force for an outcry for more meaningful representation for them in decision making bodies. The Constitution also clarifies that affirmative action programmers for women are not incompatible with the principle of non-discrimination on the
ground of sex. Carrying this spirit forward, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act for democratic decentralization has reserved one third seats for women in village Panchayats and local bodies and this includes the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the SC and ST. Further out of the seats reserved for SC and ST, one third of the total number of seats thus reserved will be occupied by the women of SC and ST community. This indeed heralds a new era of effective participation by women at the grassroots level of the decision-making process. As a result approximately one million women have been elected to these local bodies every five years. Though it took time for women to translate their numerical strength into active participation in the rural and semi urban areas, they have given precedence to health, education and decision making issues by their community service and in some cases, have been able to ensure a significant change in living conditions for the entire community. The activities of several women Panchayts in Maharashtra, Gujarat and West Bengal have been widely hailed and acknowledged. Even people at large have a high opinion about women politicians than men, as seen in a survey conducted by a noted weekly magazine ‘Outlook’. Due to impact of several movements launched by women themselves, this significant contributions to deepen democracy has witnessed large scale participation of ordinary women in its fold. The right of women to participate in public life is now supposed to be a fundamental part of the larger context of human rights. As a former chairman of the National Human Rights Commission once said that the “denial f empowerment is a denial of human right”. It is worth mentioning here a definition of democracy which states, “All citizens have an inalienable right to two things to concur individually through their representatives in law-making
and to seek public office”. Despite these enabling factors, gender inequality continues to be one of the defining features of Indian society.

WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

Women lag behind men in most of the critical indicators of human development, and poverty in many developing countries including India wears a female face. Women’s subordinate status is reflected in almost every sphere of livelihood, education, health and nutrition and governance. Despite considerable progress in the aforesaid areas, the situation of women remains poor as compared to men in many parts of the world where parents still prefer to have a son. Of late, it has been realized that women can play a very crucial role in the process of development of any society if they are properly educated. The education of girls is often hindered due to their involvement in domestic duties and attitudes outside employment. Young girls are supposed to look after their siblings and the mother normally supplements the family income by working outside. According to Desai, “Parents have several incentives for not educating their daughters. Foremost is the view that education of girls brings no returns to parents and that their future roles, being mainly reproductive and perhaps including agricultural labour, require no formal education. As more and more boys are engaged in education, there is a growing reliance on the labour of girls in the farm and house work”. Another disincentive for sending daughters to school is a concern for the protection of their virginity. When schools are located at a distance, when teachers are male, and when girls are expected to study along with boys, parents are often unwilling to expose their daughters to the potential hazards. Once of the objectives, mentioned in Agenda 21 of the IM which deals with the issue of Environment and
Development is to increase the number of women decision-makers, planners, etc., in environment and development and to consider developing and issuing by the year 2000 a strategy necessary to eliminate constitutional, legal, administrative, cultural, behavioural, social and economic obstacles to women’s full participation in sustainable development in public life. Further, it was suggested that governments should take steps to review policies and establish plans to increase the proportion of women involved as decision-maker, planners, managers, scientists, and technical advisers in the design, development and implementation of policies and programmers for sustainable development. Here the role of education becomes predominant as it is the key in empowering women. Thus it is globally realized that our policies for sustainable growth and development need to be pro-women, besides being pro-poor and pro-nature. In fact the traditional role of women in India as regards family and society coexists with the values encouraging political participation of women. The Five Year Plans have reflected this notion as issues of women and their development were viewed primarily from the welfare angle. The First Five Year Plan set up the Central Social Welfare in 1953 to undertake Welfare Board Activities through the voluntary sector. The Second Five Year Plan aimed at development from grassroots through Mahila Mandals and the Third, Fourth and the Interim Plans projected for education of women, maternal and child care services, etc. In the Fifth Plan there was a shift from the welfare to the developmental approach and it was only in the Sixth Plan that upliftment of women and their role as agents of development received priority. In fact, in the Sixth Plan document, a separate chapter on Women and Development was incorporated. A multi-disciplinary approach with three pronged thrust on health, education and employment was suggested. The
health of women is linked to their position and status in society. As is well
known that the contributions made by women are often overlooked and they
are viewed as economic burdens. Added to this is a preference for sons,
dowry, etc., which lead to poor status of women. The poor health of women has
repercussions on their families as well. They are most likely to give birth to low
weight infants. They are less likely to take proper care of their children and
provide food to them which may cause illness to their children their poor health
also affects the household economy and they will be less productive in the
labour force and lack of education leads to further marginalization, subjugation
and disempowerment of women. The Seventh Plan clearly stated to bring
women into the mainstream of national development. The Eighth Plan, for the
first time, aimed to shift the thrust from development to empowerment and the
need for flow of benefits to women in the core sectors of education, health and
development. The empowerment of women as a strategic objective was
underlined in the Ninth Plan which assures that at least 30 per cent of the funds
/benefits from all development sectors will flow to women. The Approach Paper
of this Plan called for women’s component plan as a part of the plan of each
sector to identify the impact of plans and programmers on women. The
Approach Paper to the Tenth Plan underlines the need of the empowerment of
women by implementing the recently adopted National Policy for Empowerment
of Women (2001). In fact, India is among a few developing countries where
gender equality and improvement in the status of women are specifically stated
to be central goals of development and social policy.

Continuing with this spirit, a National Perspective Plan for Women was
published in 1988-2000 which underlined gender equality as a precondition for
strengthening the institutional structure of democracy. This Plan noted that the number of women occupying leadership positions at local, village, district and national levels is still not commensurate with their numbers in society. And due to various socio-economic constraints women’s participation in elections is to a large extent dependent on the mobilization of efforts of the political parties, general awareness among the community of the importance of exercising franchise and the overall political culture. As a matter of fact, the success of the Plan to motivate women for facing socio-economic and political challenges depends on the “presence or absence of a political will”.6

The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001, while taking note of the wide gap between the goals enunciated in the Constitution, legislations, policies, plans, programmers, and related mechanisms, on the one hand, points out the situational reality of the condition of women on the other. It acknowledges that. “The empowerment of women has been recognized as a central issue in determining the status of women”. The policy sets in motion, the objectives of promoting their advancement, development and empowerment and underlines the *dejure* and *defacto* enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on an equal basis with men in all spheres and their equal access to participation and decision making in the social, political and economic life of the nation. The need for strengthening legal systems aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination against women has been emphasized. Thus, a broad framework and a perspective for empowerment of women exists at the policy level in India which needs to be implemented in the true spirit of the aforesaid policy.
Indian Parliament has all along been making a consistent effort for increasing the representation of women in legislative bodies. Towards this end, on March 8, 1996 i.e., International Women’s Day, the House unanimously adopted a Resolution providing, adequate reservation of seats for women in the legislatures of states as well as in the Parliament. And to monitor the progress and to achieve the objective and also to suggest ways and means to implement the policies and projects to be implemented for improving the status of women, a Joint Committee of both Houses was set up in 1997. So far this committee on Empowerment of Women has presented nine reports on varied issues like developmental schemes for rural women, functioning of National and State Commissions for women, violence against women, during riots, and training and empowerment of women in local bodies. In its Eighth report, this Committee recommended for expanding opportunities for women’s participation in the Executive Committee and other Committees of the local representative bodies. As representation of women was found far from sufficient in committees and Executive Committees of Panchayts, this committee recommended that women’s representation in those committees should be at least one third, in proportion to their strength in the local bodies. The Committee further encouraged women by providing to appoint a woman as the Vice-Chairperson in the Chairperson is a man and vice-versa. Thus Indian Parliament through its committees is seriously engaged with the issue of empowerment of women. This issue had been a predominant concern in a special session of Parliament on the occasion of Golden Jubilee of Independence in August 1997 and also on the eve of the International Women’s Day in 1999. In fact the Department Related Parliament Standing Committee of Human Resources Development is currently focusing attention on the issue of making our budgetary process
more sensitive to women’s issues. The Committee is aiming to stress on the need for greater availability of micro-credit facilities to the women’s self-help groups spread over large parts of the country for their economic well-being and empowerment. This will also be very useful for their families. As pointed out by Coorod, “Women earn money they spend it in the further education and health of their children, as opposed to men, who often spend it on drink, tobacco or other women. They will gain greater social standing inn the household and the village, and will have greater voice”.

**SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SCENARIO**

Women constitute a substantial proportion of population of a given society. The status of women which reflects the type of society and culture they live in, is measured in terms of the level of their health, education, income, employment, rights as well as the role played by them in the family, community and in the society. The health status of women, which includes their physical, mental and social conditioning in addition to their biological and physiological problems, is also affected by the prevailing norms and attitudes of society as Park and Park opines. These are important issue which need immediate attention along with the political empowerment of women. There is also an urgent need to fight the culture of aggressive consumerism, market and post-Modernism which has driven women out of their private spheres of family, placed them in the public domain and made them act according to the tunes of the marketwise version of the beauty race. With the tendency of patriarchy to trivialize women individual identity which remains deeply entrenched in society and the market and the consumer culture propagating a consumerist, corporeal, distorted, cosmetic, sexualized, packaged notion of beauty, it is
almost impossible for a woman to claim herself as the master over her own body, beauty and sexuality. As Catharine Mackinan opines that a woman is a being whose sexuality exists for someone else. Beauty is no longer understood in terms of one’s worth, essence or personality. It has metamorphosed into a commercial as well as a consumeristic article that can be bought, sold, exploited, negotiated, procured, used, shaped, reshaped, consumed, reproduced, advertised, exposed and sexualized according to the forces of the market economy and patriarchy. Today’s woman is trapped in consumerist culture that value’s being beautiful’ as the highest accolade for her. Perhaps Baudrillard correctly observes that contemporary consumerism is “What we consume”. It is the image in which we have libidinal investment.

There is a further need to understand the enigma of beauty as shown in a ‘beauty contest’ like Miss India or World or Universe, etc. Now such beauty contests are all pervasive annual events at all levels almost all over the world. In such demonstrative opera each women competes to look beautiful, attractive, glamorous and sexy. Here we see women reaffirming the notion that what is most important to a women is her sexual allure. Competition in such beauty race implies commodification of body, subjection of the body to multiple cosmeticisation, that of femininity to patriarchy, subjection of personality / appearance / apparel to sexual allure. As Eric Fromme argues that modern woman has been transformed into a commodity, which is subject to multiple manipulation, investment and trivialization and whose promotion as well as definition has solely been contingent upon the forces of market and patriarchy. It also means reduction of a woman to her biology, body to an object for experimentation that can he bought / sold / advertised for the profit of consumer
culture. Thus ‘beauty’ has taken a reductionist view of women that ignores one’s psychological, intellectual, moral and spiritual endowments. It has assumed the form of a post-Modern totem, a symbol of propitiation. No wonder today such beauty queens are reified where beauty has become one’s symbol of affluence, mobility, cultural capital, elitism and cosmopolitan outlook. People may not remember you as a virtuous lady like Vandana Shiva, Arundhati Roy, late Kalpana Chawla, Medha Patkar, Nisha Sharma or Shakuntala Devi and many more, but the whole world very well knows Madonna, Naomi Campbell, Monica Lewinski as crude gratifier of man’s sexuality. Today’s woman has nothing to challenge the traditional notion that being sexually desirable is the ultimate source of power for a woman. As Alison Jagger puts it as like wage workers for “top dollars” the woman of our times is in competition with the other women for the male’s gaze, approbation and approval. The delirious celebration of beauty and the body and the tendency to keep woman constantly captive in a state of becoming beautiful at the great expense of time, energy and money is a direct contradiction of all the gains of the women’s movement. Rosi Braidotti19 rightly explains that women have been forced with a structural need to posit themselves as female subjects; that is to say, not as disembodied entities, rather corporeal and consequently sexed’ beings. In short, our contemporary beauty game seeks to use women’s appealing body for the cause of market economy and not for the cause of women themselves. According to a noted feminist scholar Anita Anand20, the mundane obsession for skin centric beauty is increasingly prompted by universalalistic beauty game that seeks to urge every woman to fit herself into the game. Here lies the victory of ensemble over image and surrender of womanhood to the ideology of patriarchy in the sense that women are competitively striving to prove their
feminine attributes, viz. features, contours, shape, eye, glamour, beauty, etc. by which they were traditionally defined.

Although we have achieved significant progress in the process of political empowerment of women by providing several avenues of participation to women in the political decision-making process, yet the positive results of this progress are being subverted by the aggressive consumer culture accompanied by irresponsible media onslaught which has not only made women of all ages as the most vulnerable target of exploitation of all forms by male greed and lust, particularly rising rape incidents, at all places from house to society, but has also corrupted the women themselves along with men who in the name of ‘beauty’ and ‘modernity’ are themselves promoting vulgarity and obscenity. Her sense of fulfillment, as Alison Jaggar points out, hinges upon men’s approval where a woman in her self is an alienated being. So changed is the social setup today that almost every girl wants to become a beauty queen which is a sign of blessed fortune and an emblem of social prestige. This scenario certainly poses a serious challenge to the process of empowerment of women. It is, therefore, essential that a conducive environment be created for empowering women to recognize their specific needs and situation. Different campaigns and movements may be organized to help eliminate negative, oppressive and consumerist cultural attitudes and practices against women to achieve gender equality within society. An educated woman can have better access to health, nutrition and other social sectors and empowering women is not only for meeting their socio-economic and political development but also for more holistic social, cultural, environmental and also genetic development thereby ensuring overall social harmony, peace, progress and prosperity.
The constitution of India pledges equality of status, opportunities and the
dignity of the individual to men and women on the equal footing. These were to
serve as instrument for achieving equality of status and opportunity in all
spheres of life. In actual practices these rights have, however helped to build
an illusion, a semblance of equality which is far from reality. The widening gaps
between men and women in all-important spheres of life observed after
independence indicate that somewhere we have moved away from the goals
set before us by the makers of our constitution.

The World Development Report, 2000, suggest that conquering poverty
require, not just economic development, but also actions to expand poor
peoples’ opportunities, empowerment and increase their security. The
empowerment of poor women in general and tribal in particular are the only
means of poverty eradication. So any economic strategy of empowering these
poor rural women’s must make provision to link the nature of employment with
the skills and training required for efficiently running it. The study has following
objectives:

1. To observe level of socio-economic differentials according to caste and
class in women empowerment,

2. To find out determinants and respective role of each variable in
determining women empowerment, and

3. To enquire and gather the views of women on various aspect reflecting
their present and future empowerment.

The study covers the following heads”
1. Status of women after fifty years of Independence.
2. Empowerment of women through Panchayati Raj Institutions.
3. Empowerment of women through Self Help Groups.
4. Eradication of poverty through empowerment of women.

1. **Socio-Economic Status of Women: Present Scenario**

In spite of an impressive line up of constitutional provision act and law enacted for the protection, emancipation and empowerment of women, they are being subjected to deprivation, brutality and humiliation. The National Committee for status of women in India (1975) in its report pointed out that there has been serious deterioration in the status of women. They have been marginalized in both the socio-economic sphere and the political mainstream. The women have also realized the complex and subordinate socio-legal status of women in the conventional patriarchal structure along with the rising aspirations the environment of consumerism is causing. A perceptive increase in Dowry death, Violence and abuse at home. Despite all the laws, incidence of rape, female infanticide, child marriage, denial to property right to women are widely prevalent. For the working women, another set of exploitation takes place at their work place, such as sexual harassment, rape, violence or its threat, teasing, discrimination in pay scale, etc. The police record provides details of reported cases of crimes against women. It is also however, true that much of these crimes go unreported. In fact, it has been observed that, women often face violence at the hand of their protectors, be it the law enforces or their family members. The following table will give a detailed account of these crimes against women.
2. **Empowerment of Women through Self-Help Groups (SHGs)**

Empowerment of Women through SHGs are the needs of the hours. It is basically concerned with equality, participation, influencing decision and access to opportunity. It has been realized that organizing of women group is one of the most effective tools for involving women in the development process and this task can be fully performed by the involvement of Self-Help Groups in women’s empowerment.

**TABLE – 1**

*Incidence of All India Crimes Against Women*

*Number of Cases Reports (1998-99)*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Incidence of Crime</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>199</th>
<th>% Change in 1999 over 1998</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>1551</td>
<td>5468</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molestation</td>
<td>30959</td>
<td>32311</td>
<td>4.37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual Harassment</td>
<td>8054</td>
<td>8858</td>
<td>9.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnapping and Abduction</td>
<td>16351</td>
<td>15962</td>
<td>-2.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dowry Deaths</td>
<td>6975</td>
<td>6699</td>
<td>-396</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cruelty at Home</td>
<td>41376</td>
<td>43823</td>
<td>5.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime against Women</td>
<td>18866</td>
<td>123121</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
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The emergence of SHGs is a right step in the right direction. A SHGs is a group of 10 to 20 people from a homogenous class who come together for addressing their common problem. It is usually informal groups whose members have common perception of need and importance towards collective action. A common base like caste, blood and community link the members. The SHGs provide the benefits of economic of scale, cost effectiveness,
alternatives for different financial services, collective learning, democratic and participatory culture and a common platform. Moreover, the benefits of SHGs are based on co-operation rather than competition. Social mobilization through SHGs is inevitable for economic empowerment and poverty alleviation. The SHGs have been found to enhance the equality of status of women as participants decision-makers and beneficiaries in the democratic, economic, social and cultural spheres of life.

**TABLE – 2**

Crime Against Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>20611</td>
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<td>-7547</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Pornography</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-389</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Import of Girls</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-167</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources:
A study was made by NABARD to review the performance of SHGs. Some of the findings of this study are given below:

a) The average net income per household has increased by about 33%.

b) Employment has increased by 18%.

c) SHGs activities has enhanced the self-confidence of the members.

d) The feeling of active participation, self-esteem and communication with other has improved after association with SHGs.

e) The member of SHGs are in position to formulate plans, implements the plans and evaluate the plans themselves.

3. **Political Empowerment of Women in Panchayti Raj**

The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were established with two basic objectives; firstly, of Gram Swaraj by decentralization power down to the village level and secondly, providing and effective instrument of rural development. 73rd constitutional Amendment Bill (1989) depict that women’s role in PRIs has been ensured by provision of reservation of one-third seats for women at all the three tiers. These provisions are directly related to the women’s participation.

In practice women were virtually denied access to political power through Gram Panchayats. From gender perspectives, three tier Panchayti Raj system was more pro-women than earlier local bodies. It is because the new system envisaged the co-option of women as functionaries of these institutions. However, these institutions failed to achieve the desired result due to other administrative, political and financial constraints. Even the Government of informal political activity of women, their role in the formal political structure had virtually remained unchanged.
The National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000) examined all aspects relating to political participation and decision-making and expressed concern about the insignificant role of women in the formal political decision-making process.

It is true that the recent constitutional amendments have significantly enhanced the status and importance of Panchyati Raj Institution (PRI) as an instrument of development and augmented their strength as an institution of paramount significance of the political empowerment of women. Due to poor female literacy rate, poverty, ignorance and other cultural and social barrier, the present level of participation of women in the political field has been quite insignificant. Women’s Bill seeking reservation of 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and the State Legislature are not favoured by some of the political parties. The success of the proves of political empowerment of women will depend on organizational and policy changes for revitalization of PRIs, electoral reform, sustained drive for political education, gender sensitization campaign and male enlightenment about the importance of gender equality and justice.

4. **Eradication of Poverty through Empowerment of Women**

It is becoming more evident that the majority of the poor in both the developed or even developing countries are women. Poverty among rural women is growing faster than among rural men. The number of women in absolute poverty rose by 50 per cent as against 30 per cent for rural men. The trend of this process strongly indicates that the gender composition of the poor is veering towards a greater share of women.
Analysis of women’s poverty suggests that its main causes stem from the perpetual disadvantage of women in terms of their position in the labour market, access to productive resources and income for the satisfaction of basic needs. This also demonstrate that poor women possess exceptional resourcefulness, initiative and entrepreneurial spirit and that they show tenacity and ability of self-sacrifice in trying to take a long-term view of their poor economic conditions and in safeguarding their livelihood. From the last twenty years the eradication of poverty among the growing proportion of poor women is the single most important issue before the policy-makers.

The Earth Summit in Rio, the Human Rights Conference in Vienna, the population conference in Cairo and the Beijing conference, etc. all were milestone events in terms of advancing our understanding of the crucial role of women in development and focusing the attention of the international community on the issues concerning the role of women in the work place and in society. All of them drew attention to women’s full and effective participation in development.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMMERS FOR EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

The programme of STEP, which was launched in 1987, seeks to provide new upgraded skill to poor and assert less women in the traditional sectors of agriculture, sericulture, handicraft, fisheries, dairying, poultry, etc. for enhancing their productivity and income generation.

The Norwegain Agency for International Development (NORAD) extends assistance for training and skill development and promotion of self-reliance
through income generation for women in non-traditional trades in the country upto 1999-2000. About 81 projects have been sanctioned to benefit 6,805 women. The National Commission for Women (NCW) was set-up in 1992 for safeguarding women’s rights and promotion of their empowerment. The Commission works for review of laws, intervention in specific individual complaint of atrocities and sexual harassment of women at work place and remedial action to safeguard the interest of women.\textsuperscript{11}

A national credit fund, Rastriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) was set-up in 1993 to extend credit facilities to poor and needy women in the informal sector. The scheme of Balika Samridhi Yojna was launched in 1997 with the specific objective to change the community’s attitude towards the girl child, encourage enrolment and retention of girl children in schools.

The National Policy for Empowerment of Women is being finished by the department. The policy would prescribe strategies and action points to bridge the gap between the equal \textit{dejure} status and unequal \textit{defecto} position of the women in the country. It would seek to guide action at every level and in every section of mainstreaming gender perspectives into all laws, policies, programmers, regulations and budgetary allocation of the government.

Five National Awards of Rs. 1.00 Lakh each to be known as Stree Shakti Puraskar have been instituted in the name of eminent women personalities in the Indian history, namely, Devi Ahilya Bai, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Mata Jeeja Bai, Rani Gaidinlee Zeliang and Kannagi. The Award will be given to women who have triumphed over difficult circumstances and have fought for and
established the right of women in various fields. During the 9\textsuperscript{th} plan period (1997-2002) following initiatives for the empowerment of women were taken:

1. Adoption of Women’s Component Plan (WCP) to ensure that benefits from other development sector didn’t by-pass women and not less than 30 per cent of funds / benefits flow to them from all the women-related sectors. Review of the progress of WCP during the 9\textsuperscript{th} plan revealed that funds flowing from one of the women-related departments was as high as 70 per cent of its Gross budget are support of the 9\textsuperscript{th} plan.

2. Launching of “Swa Shakti” to create an enabling environment for empowerment of women through setting up of self-reliant Self Help Groups and developing linkage with micro-credit to ensure credit facilities for income-generation activities.\textsuperscript{12}

3. “Stree Shakti Puraskar” was announced for outstanding contribution to the upliftment and empowerment of women.

4. A task fore on women was set-up to review the existing women specific and women-related legislation and suggested enactment of new legislations or amendments, wherever necessary.

5. A National policy for empowerment of women was adopted to eliminate all types of discrimination against women and to ensure gender justice.

6. The year 2001 celebrated as “Women’s Empowerment Year”.

7. Indira Mahila Yojna was recast as “Swayamsiddha”.
8. Swadhar was launched to extend rehabilitation services for ‘Women in difficult Circumstances’.

WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING

The secular India endeavours to provide the necessary conditions for greater participation of women in all spheres of life. Equality of opportunity is guaranteed, and discrimination on grounds of class, language religion, sex or creed is prohibited. Yet, in reality, women’s participation in decision-making at all levels—national to local—is low. The challenges in seeking to redress this inequality in a diverse and complex country like India—are enormous. They are related to overcoming attitudinal, institutional, cultural and social restrictions that have grown over centuries. There is now, however, an acceptance that women’s participation in decision-making in large enough numbers at every level is needed. Women’s unique experiences and perspectives would enhance and after definitions of problems and solutions and would also empower them.

The Committee on the Status of Women in India reviewed women’s role and status in the political processes since Independence. The Committee observed that “all the indicators of participation, attitudes and impact came up with the same results – the revolution in social and political status of women for which Constitutional equality was to be only the means still remains a very distant objective. The large masses of women continue to lack spokespersons who understand their special problems and are committed to their removal in the respective bodies of the State”. While there are some spokespersons now, their voice is still somewhat feeble, because of their numbers. To actualize the Constitutional guarantees, gender visions and institutions need to be fostered.
Participation of women is an integral part of democratic process and strengthening the quality of civic life. As they are half the population, women must be in decision-making in all socio-economic and political organizations. Obstacles which to not let women participate fully need to be identified and removed. Often structures and social norms are barriers, and stem from social conditioning which inhibits women from aspiring to decision-making positions. Governmental and non-Governmental interventions should facilitate and promote women’s participation in decision-making.¹³

Is it the opportunity for decision-making for women which must come first or is it many more women in decision-making positions who will make a difference? Both are needed. Entry of a large number of women into decision-making processes can radically change the existing situation. If more and more women are associated at different levels, it is bound to affect public policy. Women’s issues will be transformed into societal issues. The most critical role for women will be to resist inequality and injustice, nor merely for women, but for all. So far, very few women have risen to high levels without personal sacrifice, suffering or discrimination. This can change when women get into existing patriarchal structures, stay on and exercise women’s visions and leadership. Creating a suitable environment for free and fearless participation of women is a necessary pre-condition towards establishment of a just and equitable order.

Women, through participation in public life, have effected change in their circumstances. In the North Eastern region of the country, for example, there have been collective movements under the banner of Nisa Band (prohibition) and Meira Paibi (Torch Bearer) since 1975 and 1980 respectively. They have
organized campaigns against alcohol, trafficking in drugs, and other anti-social activities such as gambling and theft. The Meira Paibi guarded groups of families at night, circling the locality with burning torches. Sometimes they imposed a fine on the sale and consumption of liquor. At other times, they gathered at the Police Station for release of persons who they felt had been arrested without reason. Recently movements seeking a political identity based on caste, ethnicity, culture and religion have surfaced, such movements view the empowerment to women as somewhat of a threat to their vision of a social order. Contemporary history indicates that in defining identities or values that have to be preserved, it is the perceptions of male political leaders that rule the day.¹⁴

Some studies of Parliamentary participation indicate that women members participate more actively in ‘women’s issues’ health, welfare, atrocities against women, crimes like dowry and violations of human rights. This participation is confined to the more articulate women. In issues of defence, finance politics etc. their participation is relatively limited.

At the national level, there is one woman senior Minister and 6 State Ministers, in a Cabinet of 74. There is one woman Governor and two women Chief Ministers. Women Ministers are often given welfare-oriented portfolios – women and child development, culture and youth. Science and technology, finance, defence, foreign relations are rarely allotted to women, though women have demonstrated their ability to handle such portfolios. The maximum number of women at decision making levels have been in the welfare and development oriented sectors or human resource development which includes education, culture, and women and child development. In other wings of
Government too, there has been limited representation. For example, there are only some women Judges in the Supreme Court and High Court. A few eminent women have no doubt, occupied important administrative positions such as Secretaries to Departments in the National Government as well as Chief Secretaries to State Governments. Currently, the Chairperson of the Union Public Service Commission and the University Grants Commission are women. According to available figures only around 5.71% of the total number of persons in administrative services are women. It is noteworthy that within the premier civil services of the country, the representation of women is poor. Since relatively few women enter the civil services, several efforts have been made to improve the situation. The Department of Personnel and Administrative Reforms of the Government of India has also provided. Whenever, possible, women of facers on the selection boards for post and services. Monitoring the increase in the participation of women at all levels of decision making is essential. Updating of data and preparation of reports on women in administration and management is vital. Facilities provided for posting a working couple to the same place and support services of housing, crèches, and schools need to be better implemented for these initiatives to have the desired impact.

Women also need to be better represented in the public sector undertakings, especially at decision making levels. It is estimated that only about 1.2% of the executive cadre in the private sector are women. They belong mainly to a few selected segments like advertising hotels.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1993 has directed all State Legislatures to amend their respective legislations to conform to the
Constitutional Amendment within one year and introduce a three-tier system of local governance from the village to the district level. Panchayat is to have a uniform five year term and elections are to be held to constitute new bodies before the term expires. In the event of dissolution, elections are to be held within six months. In all Panchayats, seats are to be reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their numbers in the population. One-third of the total number of seats is reserved for women. One-third of the Chairpersons of Panchayats at all levels are to be women. Devolution of financial powers has been contemplated to effectively administer the subjects the Panchayats have been allocated. These are drinking water, agriculture, land and water conservation, communications, poverty eradication education, cultural activities, maintenance of community assets etc. The following figures will give an idea of the number of women’s representatives anticipated to emerge as a result of the Amendment Act.15

Women will be governing after being elected through a democratic process of universal adult franchise, multi-party system and mandatory elections at regular intervals. They will be a part of the Government in their area, at the village or a larger District level. In States where elections have been held the results have been extremely encouraging. In the States of West Bengal and Karnataka women have gained more than the numbers of seats reserved for them. In other States, the reserved quota has been filled. The overwhelming response has been unprecedented in the history of the country. The 73rd Amendment Act has the potential of enabling women to transform State structures from within and is the first step of an emerging new grassroots level leadership. This is crucial in order to change the quality, content and
nature of leadership for development. The participation of women indicates that they were ready to avail of the landmark opportunity provided to them.

Surveys indicate that the most significant impact of elections on women has been in the areas of social and gender relations and increased self confidence. These developments have implication for the future which need careful study. Amongst them is awareness of the impediments to the transference of power to women, which could limit the chances of fundamental transformation of politics and socio-economic realities. Patriarchal control in all aspects of life severely limits the potential and scope of women’s actual and deface to participation in public life. Multiple burdens make it difficult for women to avail completely of such politically significant chance. The climate of present-day politics, dominated by elements of criminalization, corruption, muscle power and violence inhibits women’s full participation in the political process. Lack of awareness of the possibilities of political participation, means inadequate contribution to public affairs. Lack of orientation, training and preparation to fulfill the roles and responsibilities, as well as abrupt change in their further underscore the nature of challenges to be confronted.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


