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but also duties, liabilities and disabilities.”

**KEYWORDS:** *civilisation, stage of evolution, liabilities and disabilities.*

## INTRODUCTION :

“A comprehensive understanding of the true nature of women's status in society can be obtained when we study the role they play in the productive process and the control they exercise over the means of production.”<sup>1</sup>

In the case of Indian women, it has been subject to many great changes over the past few millenniums. From a largely unknown status in ancient times through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. In India, gender as a category needs to be seen within the larger social, regional

and location context. India is a land of rich diversity and it is also a country of sharp disparities.

“Within the sub-continent there have been infinite variations on the status of women, diverging in accordance with the cultural background, family structure, class, caste, property rights and custom. Ancient erotic manuals, quasi-medical texts and such like, all speak of the capabilities and idiosyncrasies of women, some of which are said to be individual features and some occupational or regional. A curious intermeshing of low deification defines women. The role, status and position of women have been far from static or uniform, ranging from an occasional display of authority to a position of subservience.”<sup>2</sup>

“The role of women has been full of contradictions so far as Indian

customs and traditions are concerned. On one hand, we hear of the ‘Vedic age’ when everywhere that they are ridiculed and exploited as the weaker sex, totally dependent on the men. Ever since women stepped out of the ‘Vedic utopia’, they entered a world where men established absolute proprietary rights over them.”<sup>3</sup>

“In no society today do women enjoy the same opportunities as men. This unequal status leaves considerable disparities between how much women contribute to human development and how little they share in its benefits. It is true that, after centuries of neglect, the past two decades have seen unprecedented human development efforts contributing greatly to rapid progress in building women's capabilities and in closing gender gaps in those capabilities. Despite this

## “CHALLENGES OF WOMEN PANCHAYAT MEMBERS IN PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM IN INDIA”

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### ABSTRACT:

Prime Minister Jawahar lal Nehru once said, “You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women.”

“The status of women in any civilisation shows the stage of evolution at which, the civilisation has arrived the term ‘Status’ includes not only personal and proprietary rights

progress, a widespread pattern of inequality between women and men persists- in their participation in the economic and political spheres."<sup>4</sup>

For the past several decades, we have been witnessing a global trend toward gender equality that is intimately linked with a broader process of cultural change and democratisation. Support for gender equality is not just a consequence of democratisation. It is part of a broad cultural change that is transforming industrialized societies and bringing growing mass demands for increasingly democratic institutions gendemoc. In Indian constitution, there are provisions for equal rights, for all citizens irrespective of their social and economical status. However such provisions exist only in pen and paper for millions.

Women in India now participate in all activities such as education, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology etc. There is no denying the fact that women in India have made a considerable progress in the last fifty years but yet they have to struggle against many handicaps and social evils in the male dominated society. The Hindu Code Bill has given the daughter and the son equal share of the property. But passing of law is one thing and its absorption in the collective thinking of society is quite different matter. In order to prove themselves equal to the dignity and status given to them in the Indian Constitution they have to shake off the shackles of slavery and superstitions. They should help the government and the society in eradicating the evils of dowry, illiteracy, and ignorance among the eves. The dowry problem has assumed a dangerous form in this country. The dowry deaths are really heinous and barbarous crimes committed by the cruel and inhuman persons. The government should enact stringent laws to afflict rigorous punishment on dowry seekers, women murderers and rapers.

But Despite this improvements the Indian women's are in much worst position than men, not only in terms of sex ratio, literacy rate, work force participation, life expectancy, but also in terms of their assess to power structure which controls and guides the development programmes of a society.

"Neglect of Women power in our society is per gaps the most important cause of our backwardness. Nearly 35 percent of our women are illiterate and most of them live in the remote and inaccessible parts of the country. They are not even aware of their rights guaranteed by the constitution."<sup>5</sup>

"The discussion of the changing status of women is fraught with varieties of problems, but one of the most formidable obstacles in the absence of homogeneity among Indian women. Women's status differs accordingly to region, casts, class and religion and also on considerations of tribal, rural and urban areas."<sup>6</sup>

### **AMENDMENTS IN INDIAN CONSTITUTION FOR WOMEN-**

Our Constitution aimed at making India the land of opportunity, our politicians have converted it into land of opportunism.

After Independence, the Constitution came in force in 1950 proclaiming equality between the sexes, among others. Five year plans started from 1951 establishing Central Social Welfare Board and Mahila Mandals. Despite these and many other measures. The Report of the Committee on the status of women (Submitted in 1974) pointed out that dynamics of social change and development had adversely affected sex-ratio, lower life-expectancy, higher infant and maternal mortality declining work participation, illiteracy, rising migration etc.

"After independence, it was made obligatory to consider women as a weaker section and the constitution has guaranteed certain Fundamental Rights and special provisions for protection of women. Several efforts have been made to enhance the status of women from time to time. The integration of women in rural development has been going on since the beginning of the post-independence era with varying successes."<sup>7</sup>

Article 14, 15, 16 of the constitution of India guarantee equality before law, equal protection under law and equal opportunity of work. "Equality before law: The state shall not deny to any parson equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of Indian prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth."<sup>8</sup>

The 1993 passage of the "Panchayati Raj" constitutional amendments reserved 30 percent of seats in elected village councils (Panchayats) for women, which has brought more than 1 million elected women into the political life at the grassroots level. The passage of the "Panchayati Raj" was due to the Seventy-third Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, a central government law which is supposed to be enacted by all the states and union territories. The panchayats have been assigned various subjects ranging from agriculture to poverty eradication.

"There are several socio-economic constraints by which women have been marginalised. The number of women in leadership positions at the local, village, district and national level is still not commensurate with their numbers in society."<sup>9</sup>

"There were no built-in liberation strategies for women in the constitution leaving us to place reliance only on statutory laws if and when made. It was not until 1993 when the Constitution (Seventy-third) Amendment Act, 1992 was passed providing reservations for women in elected panchayat institutions and affirmative action in the public domain in elected office was used as a transformative strategy for women.

Despite having a written constitution, India has not made good use of this opportunity to address equality for women. There is no comprehensive anti-discrimination law that covers both the public and private spheres and provides specific remedies for discrimination based on sex."<sup>10</sup>

### **The Status of Women Panchayat Members in Panchayati Raj Systems-**

The principal of gender equality is enshrined in Indian Constitution in its preamble. Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt, measures of positive discrimination in favour of women.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments (1993) to the constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of panchayats and municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels. It is also the benefit of this law is women have become sensitive to better health care for them and their children. In new Panchayat Raj System (under 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment) & in urban bodies ( under 74<sup>th</sup> amendment) they occupy 33% of the elective seats with decision making powers, which enables them implement; & oversee all such welfare programs.

"Empowerment is a process that enables women to and control of, material, intellectual and human resources. Empowerment is the redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal dominance. Political empowerment of women is empowerment process. Political participation is a major empowerment and participation in the decision-increased decision-making power will lead to women's the true sense of the term.

There has been great concern over the low level of representation of women in various bodies. In this connection an important step the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bills which provides reservation of seats for women to be filled by election in Grampanchayats and Municipalities respectively. Due to this bill more is getting an opportunity to take part in decision making root level. The Women's Reservation Bill in Parliament light of the day."<sup>11</sup>

But in true scenario in today's socio-political system, the conditions of women are not as it's stated in principals. In Panchayati Raj system women are in worst position in every term. They admit the pressure from the family; societies are male counterparts of panchayat. The reason for their indifferent behavior in panchayat is gender discrimination and male domination. Majority of women leaders admitted that their husbands made the decisions for panchayat and the wives put their signature or thumb on the official documents. Majority of women members revealed that they did not receive support from male domination administration.

Gender equality in elected office tends to go with democracy. The cultural change involves the belief that men make better political leaders than women. This view is still held by a majority of the world's population, but it seems to be fading rapidly in advanced industrial societies.

"Given the persistence of traditional and feudal society, and the place of women in family, many women in panchayats and municipalities still remain proxies for their men folk. The men openly call themselves "Panch Patis" and are the ones who actually wield power on behalf of their women.

However, recent studies have shown that women's exposure to the decision-making processes has its own dynamics. Women who had initially come to the panchayat meetings in their 'Ghoonghat' (head covered with saree) are now removing them. They are being viewed with new eyes by the community. When women 'panches' get invited to public functions, they are given respect by those very people who used to see them only in the role of homemakers, wives or mothers. It is being increasingly acknowledged that once women are given power and funds as sarpanches, they tend to use it on the more basis needs of children, families, and the community."<sup>12</sup>

"It does not mean that the status of women in India has not improved after Independence and that there is no social consciousness at all towards social reality. But it is also true that whatever little improvement is discernible by a few organisations created by the middle class women themselves. This change is also confined mainly to the women belonging to higher-middle class or educated sections of middle class only. It means in rest of the sections of society, the status of women is still oppressive and onerous."<sup>13</sup>

The existence of two worlds of women have also been emphasised in the report of the committee, on the status of women. The authors of the report remark "Despite progressive legal changes the actual conditions of the life of the mass of Indian women have not change much."<sup>14</sup>

### **Challenges for Gender Empowerment: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women-**

The year 1975 stood out as a turning point for women in the country. It was then that the first status of women report authored by a Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI)- prepared by Dr Phulneru Guha and Vina Mazumdar- was submitted to the Indian government. The Committee recorded that in spite of constitutional and legal equality, women's status in every sphere of life remained unequal with persistent disparities and although many laws had been passed to remove these disabilities, they had little impact.

"Thus Indian women pose a major paradox. On the one hand; there is an educate elite, a very small section, hardly a million out of 300 million with high status backgrounds who have become eminent and successful in many fields of endeavour; on the other hand the mass of women's suffer from discrimination, deprivation and social disabilities Indian women as a whole are much worse off than men. The mass of women compared to men are less literate, more unemployed, less visible in the authority structure, more prone to diseases and suffer more from barriers of customs and patriarchal norms and values."<sup>15</sup>

"The vast gap between theory and reality with regard to women's actual role in democratic functioning in modern India makes it clear that women's empowerment is a precondition for the success of democracy in India.

There are many cultural and religious barriers to women's equality that are outside the realm of governmental action. Thus "transforming women's consciousness and building power at the grassroots is essential". The argument in this discourse is that rights cannot be achieved unless the status of women is improved, that is empowerment. However, this kind of argument narrows the scope of empowerment."<sup>16</sup>

In conclusion it may be considered that to achieve the women empowerment, advancement can be facilitate with the co-ordinate of different sections of the society such as male gentry, religious heads, political leaders who should come forward and shun their interpersonal interest even ego to understand and appreciate that the women are equally as important segments of the society as men.

We have examined that giving the right is not enough for gender equality. The society should change the mentality for women. Although gender equality in parliament is closely linked with democracy neither variable seems to be a direct cause of the other. Instead, both women's representation in parliament and a society's level of democracy seem to reflect an underlying cultural

shift linked with economic development. a given society is traditional culture heritage continues to have significant impacts on both the percentage of women in its parliament.

Another important effort required for real empowerment of rural women is to bring about an attitudinal change in both men and women. The feeling that women are meant for household activities and rearing children needs to be transformed into a feeling of equal partnership of women and men. To inculcate this they should be imparted education for bringing about social and political awareness among both.

Indeed there are still miles to go, but we have made a beginning in this direction and its twenty years of fully formalized existence the Panchayat Raj system has been able to initiate important socio-political changes for the betterment of rural India.

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