

CHAPTER 2

INDIAN WOMEN - A REVIEW

A very brief account as to the nature and trend of writings on Indian women is provided in Section 1. References to selective literature, particularly to participation on PR, on women are included in Section 2. Finally the relevancy of this study in the face of research gap has been written in Section 3.

1. AN OVERVIEW.

In India the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women (CSWI) and its allied studies are the watershed and pave the ways for new fillip in unearthing marginal position of women as well as their significant role in every facet of national and social life. Since then writings on Indian women have not only proliferated but most importantly they persistently emphasis on; a) clear exclusion of women from the promise of progress, modernisation and development, b) declining work participation rates, shrinking employment opportunities, c) negative effects of developmental efforts which have been conceived of without taking women's perspective, d) when and how women are victimised in socio- economic and political spheres, e) ways how corrective actions should be taken. Feminists concern, however, has been the problems of rural and poor women, instead of few privileged sections, which altogether makes the thrust distinguishingly Indian.

While it an established fact that position of Indian rural women has all along been one of subservience, there has also been concerted endeavour to understand and devise ways and means to free them from utter constriction. As such, absorbing dimensions can be found in the emerging literature and paradigm of development. As a crucial shift of emphasis, invisibility of women is now reworked giving incremental ranges of visibility in the form of new array of evaluation. To cite one example, the Bombay Textile Strike would not have been continued without active support of women workers and wives of male workers¹

1. Tombat Nista. 1986. *Participation of women in Textile Strike (1981-83)*. Working Paper No. 3. SNDT Women's University, Bombay.

Also Sen. 1996. Transformation of Rural Economy. In Mahajan (ed.). *Agriculture, Rural Development and PR*. Deep & Deep. New Delhi. (Here development of village was brought about by women themselves)

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since 1980's emergence of women as an important category on the agenda of social research is like a "boom, bordering on an explosion". Nevertheless, studies on women's participation and problems in political processes, not to mention PR, are not so frequent and illuminating. We may, however, categorise spurting literature on women into following groups and sub groups there of ; Social Status of Women, Economic Status of Women, Women in Freedom Movement, Political Participation of Women, Holistic Documents and Women in PR Process

2.1 Social Status With changing times women's position has undergone profound changes. An exalted status of women can be found in Indian Scriptures². But for the most part of the history women have deciduous status. Quite a large volumes deal with general social status of women. They not only indicate ignominious status but also depict changing facets of women's lives and position³.

Sangari and Vaid(1994) examined position of women in their are relationship to culture. Several papers here argued that 'oppression of women' had to be understood and combated both at material conditions and socio - cultural practices.

Mies⁴ asserts that usual rhetoric of equality, fraternity can not be 'universal' in real sense because progress of some is historically at the expense of others. In other words men would not have been free and equal if they had not made women dependent. She is circumspective about instant prospect for women.

A lot of sociological researches have been undertaken on domestic and public roles particularly of working women both in rural and urban areas. Bhoite (1987) in her study of rural employed women found that women were still to bear entire domestic duties⁵. In the work place they were regarded as inferior to men and less reliable workers. Village community did harass younger and lower caste women employees in particular.

2.2 Economic Status of Women. A few decades earlier most literature on women revolved around their role and position within the confines of family. Since 1970's emphasis

2. Indra. 1955. *The Position of Women in Ancient India*. Motilal Banarasi Das. Banaras

3. De Souza. A. (ed.). 1975. *Women in Contemporary India*, Traditional Image and Changing Roles.

Monohar. New Delhi. Hate, C.A. 1969. *Changing Status of Women in Post Independent India*. Allied. Bombay.

4. Mies, M. 1996. *The French Revolution Can not Take Place for Women*. In Sheth & Nandy (ed.). *The Multiverse of Democracy*. Sage. New Delh

5. Similar observation can be found in Kapur. P 1974. *Changing Status of Working Women in India*. Vikas. New Delhi.

has gradually shifted towards understanding their position in social and economic relations. Women's position began to be evaluated with respect to educational and employment opportunities, health, technological development and political representation. Whatever may be the methodological problem in encompassing role of women in economic analysis, their crucial contribution to household tasks and economic survival of families is now fairly acknowledged.

In the study of 131 countries Human Development Report (UNDP; 1995) finds that in no country women even today enjoy equality with men. Though women have 11% more of the hours of works, they get only 10% of world's income and own 1% of world's property. The Report is categorical – "in no society today women enjoy same opportunity as men. This unequal status leaves considerable disparity between how much women contribute to human development and how little they share in its benefits"(p.29). In India similarly women perform 2/3 of total works (14 hours daily), earn 1/3 remuneration and own 10% property.

The action oriented assessment of UNDP(1980) delved on rural women's participation in developmental efforts and observed how women had become forgotten factor in development, supported by case studies (with reference to India as well) it advocated for revised developmental strategy that would provide equitable and wide distribution of benefits and services and greater mobilisation of people as productive agents. The study concluded that without active participation of rural women in rural development "no strategy is going to succeed".

Agarwal⁶ exhaustively dealt with women's hapless unequal position as to the land and property rights in agricultural societies in South East Asia. She has harped on women's land right as there is close relationship between property rights and other socio political inequality.

Bilgrami⁷ showed that rural women were actively engaged in production as workers and traders, had vital roles in earning and supporting their families but their contribution was not well recognised.

In the face of declining female work participation rate both in India and in the study area, Josh⁸ noted that development activities like Integrated Rural Development

6. Agarwal. B. 1996. *A Field of One's Own*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

7. Bilgrami. AR. 1988. Participation of Women in Rural Development. *Khadigramodyod*. December.

8. Josh. AM. 1989. Role of Women in Rural Development. *Kurukshetra*. July.

Programme (IRDP) helped to increase women employment, income and contribution to household. He found that market wages of male members of the household influenced market behaviour of females.

Given the nature of the rural set up as it is, it is now evident that women have been worst sufferers because of technological advancement⁹, biased extension services and misconceived development drives. In agriculture, subsistence crops are concerns of women but no sufficient research attention is directed to those as compared to cash crops¹⁰. The land reform drive in West Bengal shows how women can still be left out of development process. Though women have greater share in sowing, weeding or harvesting they do not plough. The only criterion that land belongs to who ploughs in effect marginalises women and all allocations – both land and registration of share croppers - are made in the names of male heads of families. Thus numerous female headed household, single women (living alone, having no or minor son) are left out. Even the 1994 directive of giving all those in joint names can not compensate much because the drive itself has died down, very few residue is left and also it does not provide women's inheritance rights over such joint property¹¹.

2.3 Women and Freedom Movement. Various studies¹² deal with women's courageous participation in Independent Struggle like Civil Disobedient, Salt Movement and other Satyagrahas. It is now admitted that Indian women for the first time ever came out of shell and participated en masse in National Movement and this is all but "for the leadership of Gandhiji that such a large number of women might not have come out". As Kishwar¹³ summed up – during 1930's and 40's women leaders in Congress party alone accounted more than they are found today in all party put together. The point here is that women mobilised for causes that were not gender specific. Pertinent question is – why women in so large number participated, what was the role of Gandhiji and what significant future impact it had on women's status and role?

9 Boserup. 1970. Chowdhury.P. 1993. High Participation and Low Evaluation. *Women & Work in Rural Haryana. Economic & Political Weekly*. 25 December. Singh.KB.1989. *Women and Development. Relevant Sociology*. February. . And Country Report. 1995.

10. Chambers, Roberts (1983: 80). *Rural Development*. Putting the Last First. Longman, New York.

11. For details see Gupta, J. 1997. *Voicés Break the Silence.... Journal of Women's Studies*. Vol.1(2)

12. Kaur, Monmohan. 1968. *Role of Women in Freedom Movement (1857-1947)*. Vikas. New Delhi. .

Menon. L.N.1975. *In Jain (ed.). Chatopadhyaya..K. 1958. The Struggle for Freedom*. In Baig Tara Ali (ed.). *Women in India*. Ministry of Information & Broadcasting. Government of India. Basu.A. 1976. *In Nanda (ed.)*

13. Kishwar.Madhu. (1996: 2868). *Women and Politics. Beyond Quotas. Economic & Political Weekly*. 26 October.

During national movement there was unprecedented revolutionary zeal and for that little resistance but high applause for women's participation. Richter (1991;540) noted that during national upsurge socialisation process reaches its peak and subsides afterwards. The strategy of Non Violence was within the prescribed confine of women's role and thus no clear violation of feminine image. The movement, particularly of Gandhiji, was not political as such but religion mission. Patriotism was subsumed by religion and the country was made to be a deity. All these fervours did not only broaden the flurry but also lessened constrains for women ¹⁴.

It is no denying that Gandhiji's outstanding contribution was to bring forth and streamline political role of women cutting across caste, class and cultural stigma. He gave moral and social legitimacy to women cause. However, his conception of women revolved around the special qualities of women better suited to his Satyagrahas as they possess infinite capacity for love and sufferings. To him 'women by nature are endowed with qualities of forgiveness and with hearts overflowing with love' ¹⁵. With all the reverence to this great man, it is also true that his conception was idealistic and to some extent traditional as he emphasised their passive and secondary role ¹⁶. Being so confident by himself he held that women would not only detest it but also would not achieve anything by going to parliament. However, the point noted by Phadke ¹⁷ that actual participation of women in freedom movement was not so for Gandhiji himself but for the pressure from women Satyagrahes themselves is also noteworthy.

Agnew(1979;10) is of the opinion that large number of women in freedom movement was simply part of the general crowd and not involved in any organisation. Still then their participation especially in revolutionary spheres did transgress traditional feminine role model. And is there any corresponding radicalisation of women's role in other aspects of life as such? It is wondering that women stopped just when they came so close to win and Sarkar ¹⁸ accused nationalist for not seeking reversal of customary role of women outside of patriotic areas.

14. Sarkar Tanika.(1984; 97- 98). Politics and Women in Bengal. *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*. Vol. 21(1)

15.Joshi.Puspa (1983:352). *Gandhi on Women*. Nabajiban & CWDS. New Delhi.

16. Kumar. Radha (1993: 2) wrote " that his emphasis on the ennobling qualities of motherhood explicitly sought to curb or subdue the most fearsome aspect of femininity."

17.Parties still Denying Power to Women. *Times of India*. 1 January. 1990.

18. Sarkar Tanika.(1984 : 101) *ibid*

During 1990's a parallel form of patriotism, though communal, is found in the flamboyant wave of militancy of women wings of Biswa Hindu Parishad on the issue of Babri Masjid. Even if limited in social and geographical scope, such participation has had breakthroughs in women's political self activation reclaiming public identity. But ironically neither the ideology of Hindutva nor women so mobilised do propagate equal socio economic pattern for women.¹⁹

2.4 Political Participation of Women. Some studies almost exclusively emphasised voting rights and used it as yardstick for participation in political democracy²⁰. However, the pioneering field based investigation in Majumdar(1979) – an off-shot of CSWI Report – may be one of the best intensive efforts about political status of women. Banerjee here identified variables for efficacious participation and performance of women in Bengal. Ganguly also demolished usual rhetoric of political parties about women's cause.

Majumdar²¹ lamented for inequality in present political ideology and narrated how male resistance had provided obstacles for women. She emphasised the importance of participation in informal social movements.

Mehta & Billimoria (1976; 106) found the following deterrents for women – traditional social norms, lack of education, economic dependency, domestic preoccupations and hostile attitude of males and male dominated parties.

Majumdar²² opined that rather than from top down participation and leadership should come from grassroots. Suryakumari²³ urged for creation and networking of pressure group for articulating and consolidating issues and needs of this submerged group.

Pande (1990) in her micro study in Jaipur City found their roles mainly in franchise and overall role negligible. Ganguly & Ganguly²⁴ also expressed similar opinion. Pande also found women disillusioned with present unhealthy trend in political

19. Sarkar, Tanika. Hindu Women Politicisation through Communalism. In Rupesingh & Mumtaz (ed.). *Internal Conflicts in South Asia*. PRIO, Oslo and Sage, New Delhi

20. Sharma, Sanjoy. 1984. Political Status of Women in India. *Proshosnika*. Vol. 18(1-4). Mitra & Mitra. 1990. Participation of Women in Bihar Politics. *Journal of Constitutional & Parliamentary Studies*. Vol. 24(1-4) Kaushik. 1989. Women Issues & Ninth General Election. *Teaching Politics*. Vol. 15(3-4)

21. Majumdar. V. 1986. Women in Political Process. In Kishna Raj (ed.) *Women's Studies in India*. Popular Prakashan, Bombay.

22. Majumdar. V. 1990. *Peasant Women Organise for Empowerment*. The Bankura Experiment. Occasional Paper No. 13. CWDS (Center for Women's Development Studies). New Delhi.

23. Suryakumari (1989 :18). Strategies for Political Empowerment of Women. *University News*. 5 June.

24. Ganguly & Ganguly 1980. *Role of Women in Political Process*. West Bengal Assembly Election 1977. ICSSR Report. New Delhi

Bharti ²⁵ noted that white collar working women in Bhopal City were less conscious about political matters

Ramachandran & Laskhi (1993) document for Andhra Pradesh the handicaps and disability of women in political process. They disapproved positive correlation of urbanisation and education to participation.

Singha(1993) ,written in journalistic fashion, in one Chapter "Women and Election" emphasises that they should come up by own merit and not definitely as dummy as is usually the case.

Rajalakshmi (1985) investigated why despite legal provisions women were grossly underrepresented. Chapter 6 dealing with constraints and achievement is of particular interest.

For women in Bangalore Municipal Corporation, Subha (1994) observed that though an 'elite kind of leadership' had emerged, women found it difficult to adjust to council atmosphere and criticism of male members. They were less active in deliberation and unable to affect decision making substantially.(p.133)

Panda (1995) contends that intensity of political activity depends on mental perception of individual located in different socio - economic and political situation.

Sen Chowdury (1995) finds in West Bengal no intense impact of socio - economic variables on participation. To her women so far are hardly able to influence political process and parties have not taken women candidatures seriously.

The Study of Guha (1996) has established that in West Bengal women participation at informal levels is comparatively subdued, their participation in movements is as sub stream of parties and parties do nothing to mobilise women to fight for women interest, the only consideration of parties is to consolidate support base.

Mention may be made of two other Studies – Khan & Ayshea (1982) have found in Karnataka that rural women are swayed by traditional social norms in obeying preferences of husbands / in laws even in exercising voting right. Strikingly women do not favour equality in politics. 90% respondents do not participate either as member or general public in Panchayats despite reservation to some extent (p.181). To Gough(1981) rural women have no say at all in decision making of political parties though they have largest proportion of party membership.

25. Bharti. 1989. Political Consciousness of White Collor Working Women. *Journal of Sociological Studies*. Vol. 8.

2.5. Holistic Documents. There are exhaustive, holistic documents mainly governmental Reports, taking demographic, cultural, legal and other factors both quantitatively and qualitatively such as Towards Equality (1974), Country Paper (1985), Country Report (1995), and N.P.P.(1988): Towards Equality is not only the harbinger but also most comprehensive still today. It ruefully brought forth that half of India's population is not only unaware of their rights but their potential has not been tapped by political parties which regard them as male appendages (ICSSR; 1975; 112). The N.P.P for the first time suggested 30% reservation of seats and posts in PR for women to remove, inter alia, their long isolation, to give strength, visibility and assertiveness as right step towards equality.

2.6 In Panchayats Process. Besides some informative literature, there are several full scale survey documents at District and State level such as Lima (1983), Manikyamba (1981,1989(a) & (b), 1990), ISS(1992), Bhaskar (1992, 1997²⁶), Chandrasekher & Inbanathan²⁷, Bhargava & Vidya²⁸, MARG (1997), Athrey & Rajeswari (no date) and of course the most comprehensive ISST (1995). However, Nandal's²⁹ study in Rohtak District of Haryana has little to offer.

In Maharashtra, Orissa, Kerala and Punjab women panchayats are of older age of 40+. Bhaskar(1992 ; 155) wrote that such late entry is rigidifying male domination, reinforcing ideology of domesticity and refraining them from higher leadership. In most cases, however, younger generation is now clearly making ways.

Lima(1983) in Maharashtra found that intermediate caste of Maratha Kshatya and Kumbi dominating, big land owning class having the sway. ISS(1992) study noted that 60% of ZP respondents in Karnataka belong to upper castes. In the same place ISST (1995; 40) finds poor class representation. Vidya(1997) finds here numerically minority but dominant Vokkalinga community is surpassing. In Maharashtra³⁰ women belong to highly influential and politically active families. In Haryana (ISST;1995; 176) salaried class has commanded power.

Both Manikyamba (1981; 39&41) and Lima (1983;146) traced inconsistencies in

26.Bhaskar,M. 1997. Women Panchayats Members in Kerala. *Economic & Political Weekly*. 26 April.

27.Chandrasekher & Inbanathan. 1991. Profile & Participation of Women ZP & Mandal mebmbers... *Journal of Rural Development*. Vol. 10(6).

28.Bhargava & Vidya. 1992.Position of Women in Political Institutions. *Journal of Rural Development*. Vol. 11(5)

29.Nandal R.1996. *Women Development and PR*. Spellbound Pub. Rohtak .

30. Gowankar (1993 :92). Role of Women in PR. In *Kaushik* (ed.)

meeting attendance where more often signatures were obtained from the houses of women after panchayat meetings. On the contrary Bhargava & Vidya (1992; 622) get at the regular attendance and their knowledge about panchayats encouraging. However, all the post 1993 literature assert their regular attendance and signing the Minute Book and keeping personal records of meetings not uncommon (ISST; 1995; 183)

Manikyamba (1989(a); 96) identified that if in the ZP and PS their performance was not so abortive, at the GP level it was really deplorable. In Karnataka, Vidya(1997; 155) (also ISS) finds that at PS women are less articulating and successful than that of ZP. ISS (1992; 25) study ascertained that in southern and coastal districts – having urban exposure – women tend to be more vocal. ISST(1995) has similar observation for Maharashtra and West Bengal. Manikyamba (1981; 68) observed that women were “dumb spectators” and clearly lack awareness. Their performance in deliberation in Karnataka is hesitant. In West Bengal 38% lack confidence in expressing. Gawanakar (1993) holds similar view for Maharashtra. Even after full five year term Karnataka women are unable to affect decision making substantially (Vidya; 1997; 248).

Chandrashekar et al (1991; 588) have observed that women are ignored and males preferred by villagers; local leaders have selected, financed and acted for women (p.583). They passed the onus to parties for deliberately selecting illiterate or less educated so as to usurp powers (p.586). Manikyamba found that women leadership did not receive wider social acceptance. ISST(1995;276) contends that women are opportunistically used by the whims of power holders and because of ignorance and lack of organisation women become really vulnerable. But it is also reported from Maharashtra that 52% women panchayats are being consulted by the people about their problems and for 58% women in West Bengal villagers, mostly women, usually come to them.

In Haryana in innumerable instances male mock at points raised by women (ISST; 1995; 184). In West Bengal 40% women corroborate male antagonism (ISST; 1995; 279). Here even forward looking CPM male panchayat members make fun at female counterpart³¹.

In Orissa women are dummies of male members in most cases (ISST;1995; 334).In Kerala the “biggest problem was their own family” where women let themselves dominated by husbands. In West Bengal 16% are exclusive puppet of husbands and 52% either of husbands or party (ISST; 1995; 270).

31. Basu, Uday. Panchayat Women may succumb to Party Diktat. *Statesman*. November 6 1993

While in West Bengal none had any clear idea as to why they had entered politics, in Tamil Nadu “women were seldom able to spontaneously articulate any new demand or initiate any new vision of what panchayat can do”.(ISST;1995; 301)

However as to their main concern the unanimous finding is; desisting exclusive women concern they prefer village development. Only in West Bengal some women tried to provide loans to women, protested against child marriage or molestation (ISST; 1995; 277). Report from Tamil Nadu indicates that women can accept problems of ration shop, water, roads as a means of redressing women problems but they lack cohesiveness if it is understood addressing wife beating, alcoholism or indebtedness.

Encouragingly, ISS(1992; 28) study noted that with the passage of time (here two years) qualitative improvement is visible in role performance. Panda ³² finds similar trend in Orissa after just nine months.

Manikyamba (1990; 27) attributes women’s non participation not to their incapacity but to constraints like taboo, economic dependency, passive orientation. To Bhargave et al (1992) it is traditional attitude and values. But Lima (1983; 162) is assertive in arguing that educational background both of respondents and their families is preponderant to the extent of socio- political participation. Bhaskar (1992; 157) identified two stumbling blocks – personal barriers like role conflict, lack of information, education, self image and structural barriers such as gender division of labour, domestic ideology.

Gala ³³ argued that women should rely “on their own wit”. Jhamtani ³⁴ observed that reservation for women has merely strengthened the hold of rural elite in Haryana. Basu ³⁵ noted instance where one woman dared lodge complain against one GP Chairperson. Lieten(1992(b) is of the opinion that immediately women will not steal the show but surely the colour and agenda are likely to change.

Notwithstanding, certain broad trends can be transpired from the literature on women in panchayats (mostly written by women). Women panchayats are comparatively of younger age, not so illiterate, their attendance in meetings not much discouraging but participation in meetings deserve much improvement, women leadership is steadily being socially approved but male bias still substantial. Though they are yet indecisive of their

32. Panda, S. (1995 ;106). Women in Local Government. *Kurukshetra*. April.

33. Gala, Chetna.(1991; 4). Women in Panchayat. *Manushi*. July -August.

34. Jhamtani,A (1995; 63).Rural Women; Powerless Partner in Development. *Kurukshetra*. August.

35 Basu, Subrata.(1991). Women in Panchayats. *Dhanadanya*. March. (in Bengali)

responsibilities, they prefer village instead of woman development. Their performance varies regionally – the areas with modernising exposure tend to have assertive members. Women have not acted collectively. They are usually given supervisory but not financial powers. Still today village Headmen as Gowdaru in Karnataka or directly elected Chairpersons in Himachal Pradesh are real repository of authority. A span of considerable time is required to get women acclimatised. Standpoints of parties need immediate and drastic change to lay down the spirit of collegueship. And urgent need for supportive network

3. RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY.

The relevant point is that majority of literature on women in panchayts took nominated respondents into account. While otherwise was not possible, it must have its bearings. Co option was used as patronage and caliber of candidate was not considered. Most respondents were thus from higher educated, dominant caste/class and obviously with higher political connection (in Lima's case 85%). But whenever they are to pass through elections, it is not their background alone but ability to win election becomes predominant. Thus their outlook, public relations, experience in campaign and its consequences should invariably be different from nominated members. However, most of the studies were conducted when there was occasional/ minor scale of reservation. Only since 1993 woman in 1/3 seats and posts are being drawn into open competitive panchayat politics. As this is recent phenomenon and has not drawn much social scientists into in depth empirical investigation – more so in political panchayats as in West Bengal - we feel convinced to pay full scale attention for the earnest believe that without sufficient appreciation of this new but integral component much of the objective and thrust of this third stratum would remain elusive.

Available studies are either of the following categories – a) socio - economic background studies, b) intention to find immediate barriers to women's participation, c) dealing not only with meager sample size but also with stress only on their opinion/ perception, d) incidental investigation on actual role performance. No one as such has been acrobatic in ferreting women's role in appreciation of overall functional and socio political contexts. Scant attention and that too not in a very proper perspective compels one to be even more determined. Wider term of reference in the broader parameters can only reasonably educe authentic nature of problems and prospect in the offing.