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ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT AND WOMEN: AN EXPLORATION OF CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

Dr. Rupa Biswas^[I], Dr. Sucheta Paul^[II]

[I] Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata, [II] Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata

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Abstract

Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan has the motto to make India self-sustaining in the economic sphere, i.e., employment sector, labour workforce and manufacturing activities. The paper critically analyzes the issues of women which has a significant bearing for Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan. The economic self-reliance of women is crucial for the development of the nation. Women constitute half of India's population and play an instrumental role in bringing changes in the society and development of the nation. Many schemes have been introduced to empower women in India. This research paper gives an account of the challenges and measures that has to be adopted to make them equal partners of the development process.

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*Corresponding Author:

Email: biswasrupa821@gmail.com Dr. Rupa Biswas

1. INTRODUCTION

In May 2020, the Indian government announced a special economic package Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan or a Self-Reliant India Movement to fight the challenges resulting from COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the package is to make India self-reliant by focusing on local manufacturing, local market and local supply chains. Preparing the country to face competitive global markets, ensuring the ease of doing business, empowering MSMEs, attracting investments including FDI, strengthening Make in India policies, providing support to agriculture, fisheries animal husbandry etc. are the other objectives of the movement.. The Atma Nirbhar Bharat movement aims to benefit a migrant workers, the middle class and entrepreneurs. For any programme to be successful, participation of the beneficiaries is a must. The same is true for the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhijan launched by the Prime Minister of India in 2020. To make the programme successful, participation of all men, women and individuals with other gender identities are a must. Focus has to be on ensuring the participation of the marginalized so that they are not left behind in the process of growth and development. It has been acknowledged that women are the key to creating an Atmanirbhar Bharat. Woman constitutes half of the world's population, they perform nearly 2/3 of work hours, receive one tenth of the world's income and own less than one-hundredth percent of the world's property. It shows that women are not able to take advantages of the process of development. Constitutional safeguards, welfare programme initiated by the central and state governments since independence, social legislations protecting the interest of women, programmes of equity etc. have not given desired results.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Laletal.(2022) argue that after years of government efforts, women empowerment continues to be a challenge in India and that would be detrimental to the growth of the country. Since historical times women have been suppressed, oppressed, been victims of stereotypes. It was felt that it is not possible to eliminate it completely from society but early detection can reduce the extent of stereotyping and promote women empowerment. The participation of women as entrepreneurs in the MSME sector can minimize trade deficit, increase GDP and help India gain self-reliance.

In another study by Behera & Gaur (2021) skilled workforce is the backbone for making India self-reliant. The goals of Atmanirbhar Bharat cannot be realized without a skilled workforce, the participation and involvement of women in the development process and their economic empowerment. Economic empowerment can be achieved through the participation of women in the labourforce. For varied reasons participation of women in the work force is low. Social stereotypes that prevent the progress of women should be addressed and women should be supported and encouraged to be partners in the process of development. The authors state the social, cultural, political and economic factors that contribute to the low rate of labour force participation of women and suggest ways to improve the situation.

Shamla & Balachandran (2021) strongly feels that women entrepreneurship can help in making India self-reliant. The authors mention the hurdles that women entrepreneurs face in the country-low educational, technical and business skills, financial difficulties, lack of mentors to help them get into business, little or no connection with formal or informal networks, personal and social challenges, household care giving responsibilities etc. They suggest ways of helping women to become entrepreneurs which would help in achieving the objectives of Atmanirbhar Bharat.

Talukdar (2020) in her article titled The Role of Women in Atmanirbhar Bharat has cited success stories of women entrepreneurs from across the country to validate that women if provided with the right kind of material and non material support can contribute to the economic well being of their families, communities and the nation.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To ascertain the current situation of women in the country.
- To examine the underlying factors behind the situation.
- To suggest avenues for ushering changes.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted descriptive research design and is primarily based on secondary data sources such as NFHS-5, Census, 2011 and NCRB, 2021.

5. FINDINGS

Women's concerns have been largely undermined which may have long lasting impact for India's efforts to 'Atmanirbhar Bharat'. In the present study those issues have been highlighted.

5.1 Sex Ratio:

Sex ratio of a country reflects how the country treats its women. In India the sex ratio at birth (SRB) for girls is far less than boys. It was unveiled (Census, 2011) that the population ratio is 940 females per 1000 of males in India. However NFHS-5 data shows that there are 1,020 women per 1,000 men in India (NFHS-5). Such a sex ratio has not been recorded in any of the previous four editions of the NFHS or Census.

5.2 Early Marriage:

In India men marry substantially later than women. The median age (in the age group 25-49) at first marriage is 18.8 years for women and 24.9 years for men (NFHS-5, 2021). Estimates suggest that each year, at least 1.5 million girls under 18 get married in India, which makes it home to the largest number of child brides in the world - accounting for a third of the global total (UNICEF).

5.3 Health:

Maternal mortality continues to be one of the paramount public health problems in India. Maternal mortality rate (MMR) is 113 per 100,000 live births (NFHS-5). Anemia, prevalent amongst 57% of women (NFHS-5), is a leading cause for maternal mortality. Additionally, pregnancy and childbirth-related intricacies are the leading causes of maternal mortality. The share of India's institutional deliveries has **increased to 88.6% in 2019-2021** (NFHS-5) but unfortunately MMR has not bettered in tandem with institutional births.

5.4 Education:

According to 2011 census female literacy rate is 65.46% whereas the male literacy rate is over 82.14%. Female literacy rate is lower than the male literacy rate as many parents still do not approve their daughters to go to schools. Instead of going to school and pursuing a career, they are married off at an early age.

5.5 Work Participation Rate:

Across India, women are employed in menial jobs. With little education and lacking in vocational skills, they are less likely to work in formal employments and have lesser avenues for career advancement. As per the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey report available for year 2020-21, the estimated Worker Population Ratio (WPR) on usual status basis for aged 15 years and above both for male and female was 73.5% and 31.4% respectively (PIB, 2022). In India, only 32 percent of currently married women in the age group 15-49 yrs are employed, compared with 98 percent of currently married men in the same age group (NFHS-5).

5.6 Political Participation:

Women's participation in Parliamentary democracy is a significant parameter to understand progress pertaining to gender parity in the country. Until now India has had only one female prime minister and two female presidents. Lok Sabha has a total of 542 members and out of which only 78 are female members. While in Rajya Sabha has a total of 224 Members out of which only 24 are female members (Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs, 2020).

5.7 Violence:

4,28,278 cases of crime against women were reported in 2021 and 1,36,192 cases were registered under the 'cruelty by husband or his relatives' (NCRB, 2021). India registered 31,677 cases of rape in 2021 - an average 86 daily - while nearly 49 cases of crime against women were lodged every single hour (NCRB, 2021). 29.3 per cent married Indian women between the ages of 18-49 years have faced domestic violence (NFHS-5, 2021). Thus, the data reflects how pervasive violence is in Indian society.

6. DISCUSSION

The sex ratio manifests a mounting trend (NFHS 5). However, demographers are cynical that the figure does not furnish an accurate depiction of India's sex ratio. Census 2011 shows an adverse sex-ratio there are more men than women. The missing number of women is a result of sex-selective abortions and neglect of young girls during infancy. The data reflects a soaring fondness for male children to female children. The birth of a girl child till date is unwanted. It is not only the age-old practice of dowry that is worrying to the parents of a girl child, the problem of incest, sexual abuse at home and outside, unsafe neighborhoods - where eve-teasing, sexual assaults, acid attacks are rampant, problem of abduction, kidnapping, trafficking, rape etc makes it difficult for the parents to supervise the growing-up years of their girl child. With irregular power supply, little or no access to a clean source of

drinking water, non-functional roads, uncertain income, inadequate and poor-quality welfare programmes, high cost of living etc the lives of commoners are stories of endless daily struggle. The struggle of people living in rural/tribal/difficult geographical terrains is more than those living in cities /towns/metropolis. The struggle of the socially, financially disadvantaged sections are more than the resourceful sections of society. To add to the list of disadvantages of the disadvantaged, the police, the court, the administration is of little help to them. To cite an example, when rape victims and their families approach the police to file complaints, the police refuse to register cases. Common people have to run from pillar to post to get a case registered. Getting justice is a distant dream to them. Under such adverse social situations, a boy child brings in hope for a better future while a girl child is a burden in all respects. There are apprehensions that skewed sex ratios will cause increased violence against women in the nature of human-trafficking. Because of skewed sex ratio, states like Haryana and Punjab "import" brides from other states (Pulla, P, 2018).

Early marriage is detrimental to the wellbeing of girls. It is a violation of human rights-violation of the right to education, occupation, health and protection. The consent of the parties in marriage is ignored when such marriages are solemnized. The most frequently cited reasons for child marriages in India is that daughters are considered to be a burden and so they are married off at an early age, that dowry demands are less for younger girls than for older ones etc. Families also marry off their children early to protect family honour. Worried that their children may choose their partners from other caste/religion, parents arrange their marriages early. **The consequences of early marriages are far reaching-**They are more likely to be out of school and remain unemployed. They will fail to contribute to the community and in nation building. Girl victims of child marriages are more likely to have children before they attain adulthood. Such a situation may result in deaths due to complications during pregnancy and childbirth. It may result in an increase in maternal mortality, infant mortality and child morbidity.

Recent data on maternal mortality shows some improvement which is a result of years of effort put in by the government, international organizations and the development sector. Pre-natal and post-natal services are crucial for the wellness of mother and the new born child. Several impediments such as non-availability of transport facilities, distance of the health center from the place of residence, high medical costs and perceiving institutional delivery as unnecessary have been found to be the principal reasons for not delivering at health care institutions. Anemia (prevalent among 57% of women according to NFHS-5) resulting out of poor nutrition may cause preterm delivery, low-birth-weight babies, and may hinder physical development of the new born.

Education is indispensable for bringing down disparity as it enables women to become self-reliant and serves as a means of enhancing their position within the family and community. Still a sizeable number of women in the country are illiterate. The challenges of the poor, tribal's, scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, girls with disabilities are more and they need special support from the state for their development. The state has to take special care of such girls. India can become Atmanirbhar only when women participate to the best of their capacity and ability which would be possible only when women are educated. Gender discrimination at home, caste system, dowry system, bearing household responsibilities, schools with poor infrastructural facilities are areas of concern for low educational attainment of girls.

Women's labour force participation is vital for the making of Atmanirbhar Bharat. Lacking in education and vocational skills, women experience innumerable hurdles such as adverse working conditions, wage disparity, sexual harassment and balancing the competing burdens of paid work and family responsibilities to penetrate the labour market and to gain decent work. Currently women work mostly in the unorganized sector where their vulnerabilities are the greatest.

The participation of women in electoral politics has been sluggish. Politics is thought to be a man's world. As a matter of fact, women's marginalization in state and national politics is a significant concern for the nation. At the regional level there are a handful of women who have turned out to be outstanding leaders in their respective states like Sheila Dixit in New Delhi, Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh, Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal and Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu etc. These leaders have significant influence on the national politics as well. Nonetheless these women were able to attain positions because of their proximity to male leaders.

Violence against women has been acknowledged worldwide as a violation of basic human rights. Violence impacts on all aspects of women's lives-it causes health burdens, has intergenerational effects, causes unwanted pregnancies, miscarriages, HIV/AIDS, permanent disabilities, and low-performance rates. The mental health consequences of violence include depression, anxiety, suicidal tendency. The social cost of violence - both direct and indirect is also high. The direct costs include lives lost due to

violence, cost of services provided such as expenditures on medical treatment and psychological counseling, legal protection, providing housing and shelters for women, and other social services. Indirect costs include days of work lost leading to reduced productivity and its impact on overall economy.

7. STRATEGIES

The sex ratio manifests a mounting trend. However, demographers are cynical about the data. The sex ratio has remained low for decades. The mystery of the missing number lies in sex-selective abortions and the neglect of young girls during infancy. Strict implementation of protective legislations, continuation of schemes like Ballika Samriddhi Yojana and introduction of new programmes keeping in mind the needs of the local people are essential to improve the sex ratio of the country.

Early marriage is detrimental to the wellbeing of girls. Multidimensional strategies are to be adopted to combat the problem of early marriage. Child marriage is prevalent more among the poor. So schemes like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee should be effectively implemented to financially empower households. The mid-day meal programme should be expanded to include high school and higher secondary school students. Programmes like Kanyashree Prakalpa (a West Bengal government initiative to incentivize girl's education and delaying marriage until the age of 18yrs) can be implemented as a central programme. Awareness programmes on the adverse effects of child marriage on women and their children needs to be organized in areas where child marriage happens. There is also need to work with adolescent children and generate awareness among them about the ill effects of child marriage. Such awareness programmes can be conducted in schools, anganwadi centers, local youth clubs where both boys and girls would participate.

Health problems of adolescent girls and women have to be taken care of by grass root health workers like ASHA workers, ANM and GNM. Effective implementation of the ICDS programme can help in dealing with deficiency diseases like anemia. People living in remote areas, in difficult terrains, find it difficult to access health care services. Sub centers, primary health centers should be rightly staffed and should function regularly and effectively to gain the trust of the service users. Health centers should provide all required services to service users-including pathological tests and medicines. There should be no loss of life due to government negligence.

Education is indispensable for empowerment of women. The state has to take special care of girl's education. Hence special schools for child workers, ensuring proper functioning of schools in remote areas, providing scholarships to needy students, providing uniform to poor students etc. have to be done by the government at the grass root level. Local governments have to make sure that no children remain out of school. Financial assistance should be provided to them to move into higher studies. Career counselling sessions, coaching classes for competitive exams etc have to be arranged for the needy students. With education, skill development is also important. Girls should be helped to develop job-oriented skills which would help them to become financially self-sufficient. Besides the above mentioned strategies, families have to be counselled to send their daughters to school, provide them necessary support to complete education. Sponsorship programme can be helpful in this regard.

Lacking in education and skills most women remain unemployed or work with little pay in the unorganized sector. Women's labour force participation is vital for Atmanibhar Bharat Abhiyan. Women face adverse working conditions, wage disparity, sexual harassment in the work place. Competing burdens of paid work and family responsibilities are other challenges that women face. It is essential that all girls get enrolled in schools and join job oriented skill development programmes. The new education policy when implemented would be of great help in this regard. There is need of vocational centers within the easy reach of women. Skilled women, with the assistance of government and financial institutions can start with their own business. Assistance, guidance and hand holding should be done by government bodies or development organizations. Close monitoring has to be done by the government. Crèche facilities/drop in shelters for children of all working mothers are urgently needed. Some women due to family responsibilities are not able to join full time jobs. Part time jobs, jobs with flexible working hours, online jobs, etc should be arranged for all women in the working age group so that they become a part of the workforce and contribute to the economic development of the country. HR policies should ensure benefits for both the employer and the employee. The other problem that needs attention is the gap in pay between men and women. 97% of the total women workers work in the unorganized sector. Labour laws do not cover them and gender gap in pay is high. This situation needs to be looked into. Fair wages, welfare provisions, social security provisions can increase productivity of the workers and benefit both the employer and employee.

Participation of women in politics can only ensure gender equality and increase accountability of the government to women. Once women participate, their issues would come up for discussion in the

Parliament. Policies and programmes would be gender sensitive. So effort has to be made to promote women in leadership positions, training have to be provided to women to participate in political process. Reservation of seats in local bodies has ensured the participation of women in municipalities and panchayats. Such steps must be taken in both the houses of the Parliament.

It is common sense knowledge that the powerful abuse the powerless. Education, skill development and financial independence of women are the ways to empower them. Information makes people powerful. All women should be made aware about the protective legislations and programmes that are available for them such as Family Courts Act 1984, Dowry Prohibition Act 1961, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006, Maternity Benefit Act 1961 and its Amendments and Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2013, Family counselling centers, short stay homes etc. Appropriate implementation of laws, punishment of the guilty, relief to the victim-will encourage women to seek support from police, courts and other authorities. Their empowerment will help to reduce violence against women. Men should also be included in awareness generation programmes.

8. CONCLUSION

India cannot have an Atmanirbhar Bharat barring Atmanirbhar girls and women. A big section of women, for varied reasons, remain underpowered causing barriers to the growth of the nation. The goals of Atmanirbhar Bharat can only be achieved when both men and women across socio-economic-religious-political groups participate in the process of nation building. Empowerment of the women and girl child with education and skills is the key to promote their active involvement in the nation building process. It is essential that existing laws, policies, programmes are strictly implemented and new ones framed to empower the women of the country.

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