Empowerment of Minority Women in India: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The issue of engendering development and women empowerment has been in the central stage with the shifting of paradigm of development and governance at the global level and particularly in India. Women empowerment and gender mainstreaming have been main agenda of development planning and governance in India. Gender equality is central to the realization of Millennium Development Goals. Gender equality, leading to increased work opportunities, enhanced capacities for livelihood developments, enhanced social protection and overall increasing voice may enable women to participate equally in productive employment, contributing to women's development leading to economic growth of the nation. No nation can afford development without considering women who constitute about half of the stock of human resources. Thus, engendering growth has been internationally recognized instrument of development by incorporating gender perspective and concerns at all levels and stages of development planning, policy, programmes and delivery mechanisms. The issue of engendering development and women empowerment has been in the central stage with the shifting of paradigm of development and governance at the global level and particularly in India. Women belonging to minority communities' viz., Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Buddhist, Jain and Parsi are lagging behind as against women from religious groups. Against this backdrop, present paper purports to examine the profile of the women belonging to minority communities and suggesting policy measures for their empowerment.

Introduction

Women constitute about half of the population of country however, they face disparities, inequalities, exploitation and abuse which are adversely affecting their health, nutrition, educational attainment, skills, occupational status, etc. There are a number of gender specific barriers which prevent women from gaining access to their rightful share in the flow of public goods and services. These barriers have roots in prevailing socio-cultural value system, institutional set up and societal structure. Unless these barriers are removed

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and the felt needs of women are incorporated in the planning and development process, the fruits of economic growth are likely to bypass a large segment of human resources of the country. India being a democratic country cannot afford development without considering women as they are the prime mover of economy besides their significant contribution in the economy. Eliminating gender discrimination and empowering women are among the paramount challenges facing the world today. Despite the international community's commitment to gender equality, the lives of millions of women and girls throughout the world are affected by discrimination, disempowerment and poverty. Gender equality is central to realizing the Millennium Development Goals. Eliminating gender discrimination and empowering women will require enhancing women's influence in the key decisions that shape their lives. In India, the plight of women is no better than that of women in other developing countries. Despite the honour and reverence accorded to them as deities in religion and mythology and tribute paid to them as personified in historical monuments, the ground realities have a very different tale to tell. In a patriarchal society like India, there exists the unfounded belief that man is the bread winner of the family. Consequently, the male child gets the best of the limited facilities and resources of the family. The girl child runs the risk of being aborted through the misuse of modern technology of amniocentesis, she is deprived of school education because she has to take care of siblings at home and since she is to be married off soon, investing in her education is considered generally a liability. Despite the fact that women are massively involved in agriculture, food production and the like, their work remains unrecognized. Their activities as producers are not reflected in statistics thus making their contribution invisible. Culturally, in an effort to uphold cultural heritage, the past is glamorized and with it, the trend to equality of women enhancement of their role in development gets inhibited (Pinto M., 1995).

Women constitute half of the segment of population in India and cannot be afforded to be kept out of the mainstream. Secondly, women are vital and productive workers in India's national economy, and make 1/3rd of the labour force. Thirdly, the poorer the family, the greater is the dependence on women's economic productivity. Fourthly, there is a significant gap between women's potential and actual productivity. Therefore, women will gain proportionally more if investment allocation and development efforts are shifted in their favour. Fifthly, women's earnings have a positive correlation with children's health, nutritional levels and education (Singh and Singh, 2004). At the turn of 19th century, industrial revolution brought about radical changes in societies the world over, particularly in the societies which were rooted in the agriculture. One of the radical changes was the removal of manufacture from the households to the factories and shops. The work done at home offered

lifelong educational, socialization, communication and residential benefits to the family members. It kept the unemployment and crime rate low. The industrial revolution took away this responsibility from women, brought about a rural urban dichotomy particular in aggregation society and created demand for some other education agent, outside homes. It resulted in greater segregation and discrimination within all sectors, a majority of women lacking productive and technical skills, science and technology, and extension and training programmes provided primarily to men as women are conceived only as consumers of the industrial revolution (Dhawan, 1995). At the turn of 19th century, communication revolution, which is technology intensive, has brought about another radical transformation again at the home front. Globalization and economic liberalization followed by structural adjustment programmes forced women to involve in economic activities as more salaries are needed just to maintain a house (Dhawan & Singh, 1991).

There has been paradigm shift from a welfare orientation to an empowerment approach. This has further led to the emerging concept of engendering development in order to ensure gender equity, gender mainstreaming and women-centric governance. Though, India is among the most complex democracy in the world, with a long history of commitments to women's welfare and empowerment through constitutional provisions, legislation, policies and plans even while deep levels of structural gender bias persists within families, societies and economies. There are formidable opportunities and challenges, including continued high rate of economic growth in the phase of declining sex ratio, decreasing energy and natural resources, increasing income inequality and an urban rural divide. Thus, gender equality has become a core prerequisite for sustainable and equitable economic growth (National Alliance of Women, 2008). Women are major contributors to the India's economy and therefore empowerment of women is essential for distributive justice and national growth. Engendering growth model and development plans may create opportunities for women in their mainstreaming in development process and governance. The growth models and development planning requires the suitable mechanism which is able to address the gender concerns at all stages and policy commitments along with budgetary support for them. Women are major contributors to India's economy and an important constituent of development. Their empowerment is essential for distributive justice and for the nation's growth. Engendering the nation's development plan and processes means recognizing that women and men are socialized differently and Thus, gender as a macroeconomic variable, needs to be incorporated into the growth model. Engendering the growth model requires that women be perceived as producers of economic groups and of non-economic groups that contributes to development. The

growth model in the planning process assumes three sources of growth viz., capital, labour and technology. However this excludes natural capital. An engender plan would include a gender dimension in all macro policies – fiscal, trade, agriculture, industry, infrastructure, labour and employment.

Gender Mainstreaming

Policy approaches to women and development in India have changed over the years of planned development. However, the shift from 'welfare' to an 'empowerment' approach has remained more in the realm of the rhetoric. The approach to the Twelfth Plan also exhibits insufficient awareness of the specific problems of women, their unpaid labour and their distinctive economic contribution to the nation's economy. Thus, the major shift through this initiative was to move the engendering of public policy into the macroeconomic space (Government of India, 2010). The policy approach underlying both the Eleventh and Twelfth plans expects to promote economic growth through creating opportunities for the entrepreneurial class by liberalizing domestic and global markets. This framework – in which Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth is the relevant indicator and 'a dynamic private sector' is seen as the main instrument for its expansion – gives insufficient importance to employment intensive activities and conditions of existence for the majority of workers. The inclusion of the excluded or marginalized socio-economic groups is expected to occur through a trickling down of growth, expansion of productive employment in the economy, as well as implementation of flagship and other targeted programmes to be financed by the increased revenues of the government resulting from high growth rates. However, the direction of macroeconomic and growth policies is one that continuously undermines the possibility of better employment creation for greater numbers. This in turn permeates and infects all the other aspects of the Approach such that the basic objective of making growth "more inclusive" is unlikely to be met (UNIFEM, 2013) . The strategies for growth proposed in the Approach to the Twelfth Plan appear to be formulated with little consideration for the needs and roles of large sections of the population of the country and especially of poor women. This document aims to highlight some of these gaps in the overall design of the proposed approach to planning and to suggest ways of making economic growth during the Twelfth Plan truly more inclusive.

There is little evidence to show that the accelerated growth rate of the economy during the Eleventh Plan led to any significant achievement of inclusion. It deflects responsibility for achieving inclusiveness by stating that "success depends not only on introducing new policies and government programmes, but on institutional and attitudinal changes, which take time".

Inclusiveness has remained elusive. Even the limited focus given to inclusion and equity in the Eleventh Plan appears to have been jettisoned in the Twelfth Plan Approach, which focuses narrowly only on growth per se, assuming growth will ensure an improvement in the lives of people overall. The paragraphs on inclusion in the Introduction to the Approach Paper are particularly weak as they remain at the level of general intentions. There is lack of clarity regarding how inclusion will occur (UNIFEM, 2013).

In order to ensure inclusive growth, it is essential that all potential workers find remunerative employment in the mainstream of development. *Generating productive work has to be an integral part of the plan model*. It is now officially acknowledged (NCUES, 2007) that economic 'development' has not just witnessed the growth of the informal sector and of those being employed informally, but also the phenomenon of the 'informalization of the formal sector'. Further, there is remarkable consistency in the manner in which larger numbers of women and their 'work' either become invisible in data systems or get captured in categories that fall outside the purview of protective legislation. The organized or formal economy supposedly enjoys the protection of labour laws with some modicum of social security, but even this apparent protection is elusive. The National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (2009) estimated the effectiveness of the coverage of important labour laws for the year 1999-2000. Among other things, this exercise revealed that the effectiveness of coverage as far as the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 was concerned was only 16 per cent. The International Labour Organization's recently concluded evaluation of maternity benefit schemes in India, carried this exercise further and revealed the manner in which eligible women workers were denied maternity benefits statutorily due to them (Lingan and Krishnaraj, 2010).

The manufacturing sector currently poses a serious problem for the Indian economy. Despite rapid growth in production during the last five years, its contribution to the national economy still remains relatively small and it has failed to generate additional decent employment. Especially for women, manufacturing employment actually shrank in this period. These trends are contrary to the world-wide pattern of economic development. While mentioning the need for generating employment in manufacturing, the Approach Paper for Twelfth Plan does not explore the sector's potential for doing so, besides making a 'brave' assumption that an additional hundred million decent jobs will be created by 2025, when only five million jobs were added to manufacturing in the whole decade preceding i.e. 1999-2000 to 2009-10. There was an increase in manufacturing employment from 44 to 55 million between 1999-2000 and 2004-05, but it fell to 50 million in 2010. Instead of recognizing this reality, the paper goes on to focus only on ways of enhancing

the sector's contribution to the GDP and neglects other concerns. Methods by which such a massive number of jobs are to be created remain unaddressed. Manufacturing employment actually declined in the period 2004-05 to 2009-10, even though manufacturing output grew at an annual compound rate of more than 8 per cent over the period.

The Approach Paper for Twelfth Plan mentions the setting up of a high level National Transport Development Policy Committee to develop a transport policy going up to 2030, which will facilitate an efficient expansion of the transportation network in a manner that would help to minimize energy use and would place special attention on competitive pricing and coordination between alternative modes of transport. However, transport needs to be viewed not merely as a support for rapid growth, but also as an agent for change and development, for increasing the physical and societal mobility of people, especially women. Women's inclusion in developmental activities rests critically on their mobility. Needless to state, the National Transport Policy has to keep women's needs in mind. Gendered infrastructural empowerment is obvious in the several levels of interconnections.

There are several ways in which gender sensitive policies can be implemented in the context of investment in infrastructure. These include pre-project rapid gender assessment surveys; gender-sensitive project coordination team and appropriate institutional structures; participatory project planning and implementation with women and men in communities, including procurement activities; women's participation and decision-making in community infrastructure management; women's participation in generating and operating maintenance funds; promotion of local cooperatives and SHGs for provision of materials; special concessions for women and child-headed households, pregnant women, MGNREGA households; financial resources for capacity building and training of local authorities; dissemination of guidelines in local languages for operation, management, and maintenance of public infrastructure; collection of sex disaggregated data; systematic institutionalized evaluation through use of appropriate gender budgeting tools for each project and sub-sector; formation of sector-wise multi-agency steering committees; systematic policy consultation and support for identifying gaps, strategizing action plans, and gender mainstreaming; development of appropriate infrastructure in the form of legal mechanisms and services; expansion of public sector; and extension of gendered regulation in private sector with cautious use of Public Private Partnership in building infrastructure (UNIFEM, 2013).

There is need for recognizing the critical care work provided by women, that saves the public health system both time and cost. The primary

responsibility of care-giving within the home lies with women. This needs to be recognized and support provided to alleviate the difficulties, drudgery and depression that surround this role. The burden on home-based care givers must be reduced by strengthening primary health centres and public hospitals, community care homes and hospices. The role of governance, in particular local governance, in which women can play an active role in developmental planning, given their political presence is critical in this convergence. Women's participation as elected representatives in local bodies has been noteworthy. Hence, the strengthening of these agencies' roles and powers, especially for implementing the 'inclusive' programmes at the grassroots level would be enabling for women led governance factored in. Needless to state, it is the combined effect of these inclusive programmes that can ameliorate much of the rural deprivation, in particular for women who perform some of these tasks in the unpaid 'care economy'.

Objectives and Methods of Study

The main objective of the paper is to examine the status of minority women in India and suggests policy measures for their empowerment. The paper is based on a major research study conducted by Hi-Tech. Institute of Information technology, Lucknow under the overall control and supervision of the second author of this paper, under the auspices of Ministry of Minority Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi in 2014. The present study is mainly empirical in nature and based on primary data. The sample of study comprises of 3000 women from minority communities from 13 states viz., Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. The field survey has been conducted with the help of structured interview schedules. The filled in interview schedules were thoroughly checked, edited and processed in computer for the analysis. Inferences, results and conclusions will be drawn out from the analysis of data.

Status of Minority Women

Minorities constitute 19.54 per cent of India's population. The total minority population in India was reported to be 23.65 crores as per Census 2011. Minority population constituted highest in Jammu and Kashmir (70.40 per cent) followed by Punjab (63.18 per cent), Kerala (43.71 per cent), Assam (34.94 per cent), Goa (33.33 per cent) and Jharkhand (31.52 per cent). Minority population was reported high in the state of Uttar Pradesh (3.87 crores) followed by West Bengal (2.51 crores), Maharashtra (2.21 crores), Punjab (1.75 crores) and Bihar (Chart 1).
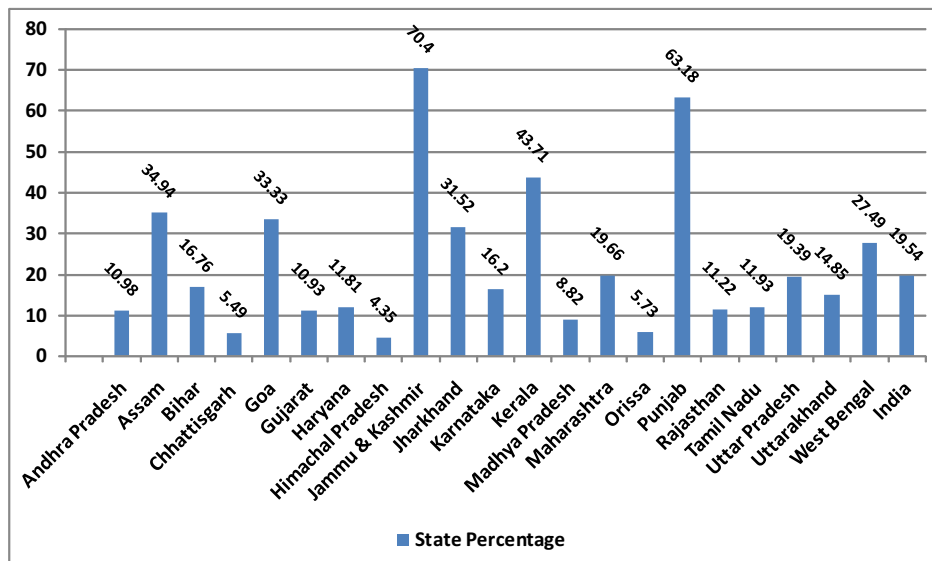
Chart 1: State-wise Minority Population of India

Indian society is an agglomeration of diverse cultures. There are numerous castes, tribes and ethnic and religious groups. "It is, therefore, Indian society is called a multicultural society. Every group has its own cultural specialty" (Linton 1936). We find caster cultural, tribal cultural, linguistic cultural, ethnic cultures and regional cultures etc. Every religious group has its own historical tradition and custom. Interestingly, among the Muslim, religion regulates the sacred and the secular practices. The Muslim, by and large, accepts their religion as unalterable and resists any major innovation.

Singh (1993) while discussion the "Modernization of Indian Tradition" points out that Islamic tradition is exogenous source of charge of Indian tradition but it has become a part of Indian tradition and has greatly influence the revolution and the growth of Indian tradition in medieval times. The contract of India with Islam is one thousand years old. It started with Arab conquest of the Sind in the beginning of the eighth century. Historically as well as in magnitude, Islam is an important and sociologically very meaningful cultural tradition in India. Importantly, Islam was founded by the Prophet Mohammad in the desert of Arabia in 600 A.D. as a reaction to the polytheism of West Asia and spread first among the tribal groups of Arabia. "Originally, it developed to a nomadic society and its social structure was said to be egalitarian in character and was not highly stratified but when the Prophet came to *Madina*. The nomadic economic structure of the Islamic society changed into a mercantile agrarian social structure, which was more complex

in organization (Singh, 1988). After the death of the Prophet Mohammad, the Khalifs-Khalifas (religious leaders) and the elected senior members of the community (like Quzis and Imams) were mainly instrumental in spreading of Islam to different parts of the world. In this expansion of Islam from Arabia to the other parts of the world, its basic social, economic and political structures got changed. For instance, the egalitarian and democratic structure of power was molded into a feudal – authoritarian structure during its expansion. A contradiction between the religious and political elites had emerged due to some political and cultural policies undertaken by the latter which were not approved by the former for not conforming to the religious perspective. "This contradiction still constitutes an important factor in the process of modernization in Islamic societies. The *Ulemas* (religious elites) as representatives of the Islamic Great Tradition tend to be conservative and reject innovations which they think are not within the framework of the Islamic tradition" (Singh, 1988). However, during the expansion of Islam many structural and cultural features of the different countries were also assimilated into its original structure through its basic principles of equality and universal brotherhoods were shared by the entire Muslim population. For instance, before "the Islam came to Persia, the society was divided into four major groups of priests, warriors, commoners and serfs" (Ansari, 1960). Likewise, in Syria Islam came into contract with the Christians mysticism and the emergent outcome was later known as Islamic Sufism (Ikram, 1984). It spread from Morocco to Indonesia through the countries in this wide region had their respective culture historic background when they adopted the Islamic faith (Roy, 1979). Consequently, in every country Islam has to accommodate different types of customs, traditions and behaviors, which have resulted into the present cultural diversity among its followers. The Muslim society in India is sharply divided into two distinct sections. The Ashrafs (four major immigrants groups of Sayyad, Sheikh, Mughal and Pathan) are the upper caste Muslims and they regarded themselves as the foreign descents and also they have traditionally enjoyed the highest rank in the Indian Muslim community. The converted Muslim was considered as non-Ashrafs in India.

The status of Muslim women can also be looked at the context of the minority situation of the Muslims in India. First of all, it is necessary to define the meaning of minority. "Any group of people who because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination" (Haralambos 1980). From this definition, it is clear that a minority is one, which is marked by certain characteristics. However, the modernization of the Muslim women in India is potential catalysts; their emancipation could be a crucial step in the modernization of the community. Their present status reflects the dominance

of traditional and conservative attitudes. An improvement in their status would not only imply a positive response to present-day needs but also hasten the process of the Muslim community's integration in to the mainstream of India's modernization effort. The process of Modernization in any society is closely related to the orientation of its people to change. Indian society is a male dominance society and women role are particular, they have to suffer more inhibiting constrains on self-realization than men. By a series of social sanction which have limited her role principally to that of mother and wife. As a customary, the main role of a woman is to take care of her children in their upbringing. She acts as the first teacher and guide of the child. So, it I necessary she should be educated. Social scientist have pointed out that there is a strong positive co-relation between the low status women and low cultural levels and insignificant societal achievements. In this connection, it is said that. "For full development of our human resources, the improvement of homes and molding the character of a child during the most impressionable years of infancy, the education of a woman is of even greater importance that that of a man. It can be argued that Muslim women have been treated as subordinate to men for a long period and also, they have been having strong belief in the tradition. Thus, the Muslim women in India are getting modernized within the framework of their religious orientation and culture. This does not mean that they are not given in principle, equality with men. Yet, they have to change their status and acquire cherished goal by maintaining the religious customs and traditions. It is true that due to the changes occurred in the socio-economic condition of the society they also try to break the un-Islamic tradition and misconceptions about their status and roles. In defining the role and status of Modern Muslim women we have to take into account their status, which has been constrained by religion for a long time as started earlier. We have also to consider the different internal and external forces which tend to bring about a new socio-psychological orientation in their outlook. In other words, a modern Muslim woman is to be regarded as a fusion of many forces. (Latif ,1983).

The Muslim women are conscious about their roles in culturally prescribed pattern of behaviour. No doubt they are not ready to accept practices and custom like that women are not supposed to go out for job and education, they are not supposed to have a say in arranging marriage or selecting their spouse etc. These practices and customs are loaded upon them and are not sanctioned by Islam. In India, the social structure of Muslim women seems to be consisted of the core of the traditional cultural set up. However, with an interplay of a number of exogenous forces which have affected its traditional cultural set up and internal indigenous developments some changes can be seen in the Muslim society. More precisely, modern education, secularization and increased communication or mass media have led to the

genesis of a relatively open and progressive Muslim social structure. As a result, the Muslim women have begun their striving and to look at their problems from the rational and scientific point of view. A hitherto unforeseen change has also evolved in values and attitudes of the Muslim women towards men and their sexual relationship. The dominant values of pre-modern societies like dominance, dependence, segregation, servility, obedience and loyalty are also being replaced by independence, individuality, equality and companionship. The status of Muslim women in India is not better than that of other women. Muslim woman in India is influenced by the Islamic injunctions and also the impact of the Hindu culture and traditions because mostly Indians Muslims are converts from Hindustani. If we want to know the changing status and role of Muslim women in India, it would be better to give a brief account from traditional period to contemporary period. It is interesting because from India was invited by different rules in the past. These innovations had definitely influenced the Indian women.

The analysis demonstrates that the plight of Muslim women in India is not better that of women belonging to other social groups. Moreover, majority of the Muslim women are illiterate, low educated living in absolute poverty. Importantly, most of the Muslim women are confined to four walls of house and have been assigned the domestic work caring and nourishing of children, performing household activities etc. Only a small segment of Muslim woman is engaged in economic activities for substantial income contribution to families. Moreover, the role conflict among such woman has been observed to be high since they are facing the problems of official tasks and orthodox family attitude. Through, education and other factors have significantly changed the environment and Muslim women have started enjoying the liberal and democratic advantages and benefits. Moreover, a significant number of Muslim women in-developed status and areas has started peeping out their heads to participate in changed socio-economic factor. Importantly, the young generation is demanding more liberty and breaking the orthodox norms of Muslim community. This demands the concerted effort on the part of government and non-government for empowerment of women and making them crucial counterparts of society for social advancement.

Parsis are a small but prosperous religious community of India, which reached a peak of population of about 114 thousand in 1941. The recent census enumerated Parsi population about 69 thousand in 2001. The unprecedented fall in Parsi population has drawn the attention of researchers, policy makers, and Parsis themselves. For a declining population of this magnitude, demographers are anxious to know when the size is going to be halved and the timing by which a population is likely to be extinct. Parsis are the followers of monotheistic form of religion known as Zarathustra found 2500 years ago

in Iran (Persia). They migrated to India from their motherland after the Arab victory over last ruler of Sassanid dynasty around 640 A.D (Briggs, 1852; Pithawalla and Rustomji , 1945). They first landed at around 100 miles North of Bombay, a place called Navasari in Gujarat and from there they moved to other cities in India. With the rise of political power of European trading companies in India by nineteenth century they acquired prominent positions in economic, educational and political life of the country. By the end of nineteenth century, 85 per cent of the Parsis community was urbanized, and only 15 per cent lived in the villages (Desai 1968; Bose and Kullar, 1978).

In India, Parsis maintained some sort of social isolation by practicing endogamy and not accepting any new converts to their faith (Visaria, 1974; Alexrod, 1980). However, they have selectively adapted themselves to social milieu of Gujarat by accepting the language and the dress of the region (Visaria, 1974). It may be noticed that during 1901 to 1941, there was a slow but steady increase in Parsi population. Although there occurred several famines and epidemics during this period, Parsis were least affected by these natural calamities as most of them were living in urban area (Visaria, 1974). After 1941, Parsi population declined. The figures of 1951 census were likely to be affected by the partition of the country due to exclusion of Parsis who remained in the city of Karachi or other parts of Pakistan (including present day Bangladesh). But even after considering the population of Parsis in Pakistan, in the Indian subcontinent as a whole, the growth of Parsi population during 1941-1951 was not more than two percent (Visaria, 1974). This shows that the effect of fertility decline on the growth of Parsi population started much before than the fertility decline experienced by the average Indian population in the mid 1970s. The incidence of non-marriage is much higher among Parsis (Karkal, 1982; Billimona, 1991; Singh and Gowri, 2000). A survey in Mumbai shows that a significant proportion of households was headed by unmarried males (9 per cent) and unmarried females (18 per cent) (Karkal, 1982). The marital structure of Parsi population shows a deviation from universally observed pattern of marriages in India (Karkal, 1975). The primary reason for non-marriages and late marriages is due to the concern of the young males and females to have an acceptable minimum standard of living for family formation (Visaria, 1974). As such, Parsis women are more concerned about their status and career. They are highly educated and work outside their homes. Marriage seems to be the second priority. Another peculiar feature of Parsi community is the lack of family or peer pressure to get married at a reasonable age (Bhavnagri, 2005; Gould, 1980; Ketyauntt, 1982). It is interesting to note that age at marriage among Parsi women is about 27 years and among men it is about 31 years. One out of 5 males and one out of 10 females remained single even by age 50 compared to almost universal marriages among the Indian populations. It is worthwhile to note that Parsis

vigorously retained their religion and distinctive form of dress; however, they embraced western behavior and values in other domains. Their modernized values promote them to have marriages by their own choice; on the other hand parental and familial constraints and obligations are still formidable in the community and create a contradiction that is difficult to overcome. In the bargain, many of them remained never married. Inter religious marriages are also prevalent among Parsis, but they do not accept new converts to their faith. This has influenced the size of population among Parsis (Visaria, 1974, Axelrod, 1980). The Parsis who were residing in the state of Maharashtra had the lowest fertility compared to those living in Gujarat and other parts of the country. Since majority of Parsi population (nearly 80 per cent) is living in Maharashtra, their lowest fertility has contributed to the overall decline in Parsi population in India.

The status of minority women is reported worse than the status of women belonging to general communities and castes. Among the minority communities, the status of Muslim women has been reported low as compared to status of women belonging to other minority communities. It is to be noted that traditions, values and social system have direct bearing on the status of women belonging to minority communities. Poverty and backwardness has been reported high among Muslim, Sikh and Christians while Parsis, Jain and Buddhists are comparatively better off. There is imperative need to introduce a separate scheme for the empowerment of minority women rather than emphasizing on women leadership development as gender mainstreaming is more important rather than creating leaders among minority communities.

Discussion of Results

Most of the women respondents were from the middle age group. More than 2/3rd women were belonging Muslim community while about 14 per cent were Christians. About 2/5th respondents were from General communities while slightly more than 1/3rd were found belonging to OBC communities. Majority of the respondents were found married. The educational level of respondents has been found poor as about 2/5th respondents were primary pass while 1/4th respondents were matriculates. The proportion of graduates and post graduates was recorded less than 10 per cent.

About 2/5th respondents reported that they are economically active however; most of them were self employed and labours. About 1/3rd were found engaged in agriculture, forestry and fishing sector while about 1/3rd were found engaged in services sector. Most of the respondents reported that their monthly income is less than Rs. 10,000. However, they are significantly contributing to the family income. Slightly less than 1/3rd

respondents reported that they have bank account in their names. However, the ownership of life insurance policy was reported by only 8 per cent respondents. The financial inclusion was found significant in the state of Karnataka and Kerala as compared to other states. Financial inclusion has been again recorded high among Parsis followed by Christians and Muslims.

Less than half of the respondents were from rural background. This was found more pronouncing in the state of West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Bihar. Only 28 per cent respondents were from urban areas. This was found more pronouncing in Assam, Karnataka and Jammu and Kashmir. About half of the respondents reported that they belong to joint families. This was found more pronouncing in Uttar Pradesh followed by West Bengal, Haryana, Assam, Manipur and Maharashtra. The main occupation of family has been reported to be labour, self employment and service. Thus, about 2/3rd respondents were found belonging to lower and lower middle class. About 28 per cent respondents were from middle class. Majority of the respondents reported that they have ration cards and most of them reported that they own BPL Cards.

About 22 per cent respondents reported that they are working. This was found more pronouncing in Karnataka followed by Jammu and Kashmir, Maharashtra and Kerala. The proportion of working women was recorded high among Parsis followed by Buddhist and Christian communities. However, about 55 per cent respondents were self employed and about 29 per cent respondents were found working in private sector. Only 10 per cent respondents were government servants. About 2/5th respondents reported that their family members encourage them for participation in decision making. About 1/3rd respondents said that they are enjoying freedom in their families while about 37 per cent respondents reported that their position in family is equal to their spouse.

About 62 per cent respondents reported that they are availing ration from PDS shops. This was found more pronouncing in Uttar Pradesh followed by Gujarat, Kerala, Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. Majority of them further reported that they are receiving ration from PDS shop regularly. However, they are also facing problems in availing ration from PDS shops. These problems are mainly related with insufficient quantity, bad quality, non-availability in time, irregular supply and dishonesty in measurement. Only a negligible proportion of respondents reported that they have family members with political background. This was found somewhat significant in Kerala, Haryana and Assam. The political members are mainly associated with Village Panchayats, Political Parties and urban local government.

Women's attitude towards economic, cultural and social issues has been found positive. Their attitude and perception vary depending upon the level of education, socio-cultural background, states, regions and religious groups. Most of the women were found aware about the government programmes of ICDS, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Mid Day Meal scheme, and maternity benefit scheme, Jannani Suraksha Yojana, Scholarship Scheme and Indira Awas Yojana. About 36 per cent respondents were found aware about Leadership Development Scheme for Minority Women. The awareness level about the scheme was recorded high among Christians followed by Muslims and Sikhs. Again, awareness about the scheme was recorded high in the state of Manipur, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Legal awareness has been found significantly low except a few acts such as Child Labour Act and Chid Marriage Act.

About 30 per cent respondents revealed that they have participated in Leadership Development Scheme. This was found more pronouncing among Christian communities followed by Muslim communities. The proportion of women receiving benefits under the scheme was recorded high in Manipur, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra. Most of the respondents who were provided Leadership Training reported that the training programmes were non-residential however, they were provided reading materials. Majority of the trainees reported that they received training on the modules of health and hygiene, women leadership, welfare scheme and programmes for minorities, disease of children and vaccination, public distribution system, housekeeping and gender issues. The main criteria for selection in leadership training were reported self motivation, leadership quality and age.

Most of the women reported that there has been positive impact of leadership training in terms of sensitization and awareness towards gender issues, leadership development, educational empowerment, active role in decision making process, increased social status and recognition, effective delivery of services, enhanced role in implementation of development programmes and sensitization and awareness towards development programmes.

Suggestions

• Women empowerment must be holistic universal and participative in order to insure inclusive and in situ growth and development of the Nation. Road map of minority women empowerment, dealing with different sectors of economy should be prepared keeping in view of the futuristic vision. Special emphasis should be given to promote the employment opportunities for minority women in those sectors of

economy which have been leading the economic growth in the country such as information technology, telecommunication, bio-technology, etc.

• Minority women's empowerment requires adequate resource allocation in all areas including health, education, sanitation, nutrition, employment, access to credit and asset ownership, skills, research and design technology and political participation. The regional imbalances must be addressed while spatial mapping of social infrastructure and access to employment opportunities for women may highlight the resources India should adopt a broad policy framework including growth with equity, improving governance through participation of poor and collaboration with all stakeholders in planning process and regional cooperation to remove trade barriers and eliminating harmful taxes and competition practices.

• India needs to continually investment in skills and knowledge development and training for their workforce in light of global changes, including advances in technology and work organizations. Human resources development or human capital formation are essential for sustaining a productive workforce. Promoting the greater participation of minority women in decision making process remains another major objective towards the goal of empowering women. Thus, it is imperative to create more opportunities for women to participate in the institutions of government..

• A societal reorientation for gender just society would require a radical transformation through awareness on gender issues and sustained efforts of imparting training and education on various developmental activities. Minority women's own perceptions about themselves also need to be changed; besides a positive role played by media and related organizations.

• Minority women's access to paid work may give them a greater sense of self reliance and greater purchasing power. Similarly, women's presence in the governance structures of society clearly carries the potential to change unjust practices. Thus, it is imperative to create more opportunities for women to participate in decision making process and governance of development programmes.

• Participation of minority women in planning and decision-making still remains an area of neglect. The formal institution such as political parties, legislators, trade unions, cooperative, techno-bureaucracy, industry, trade and commerce reflect a very low level of participation of women particularly at more responsible positions. In order to resolve this problem and to initiate necessary policy initiatives, a comprehensive policy statement should be brought out both by the government and corporate

sectors. This policy should focus on the reservation, entitlements and gender just equatous society.

• There is considerable scope for development of micro finance since there is enormous unmet demand for the financial services in the sector. Therefore, enacting fresh legislation or appropriate amendments in the existing legislation related to micro financial institutions is needed. Government support is required to initiate income generating activities. More training in income generating activities is required. Training programmes should be organized as per market demand and feasibility studies should be undertaken.

• Children's nutrition levels require special attention from the view of addressing food security levels among the poor and backward sections of the population. The Buddhist children report the worst stunting, washing and child mortality indicators. ?Improving the anaemia status of mothers is critical for reduction of child anaemia levels as well as for improving nutritional status. Efforts through existing ICDS programmes to provide iron supplementation need to be strengthened further to improve access of the minorities, especially the socially and economically deprived sections among them. Outreach of immunization with children receiving all vaccinations must b given special attention for the minorities.

• The country as a whole requires attention in this area, given the low proportion of higher-educated persons. The minorities too require support through reservations, scholarships and special tutorials to increase their share in higher education levels. The Buddhists, who are predominantly Scheduled castes have lower shares of literates among the tertiary levels of education than the all-India figures. Special support is required for improving access to technical degrees and diplomas, especially for the poor and backward segments of the minorities.

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