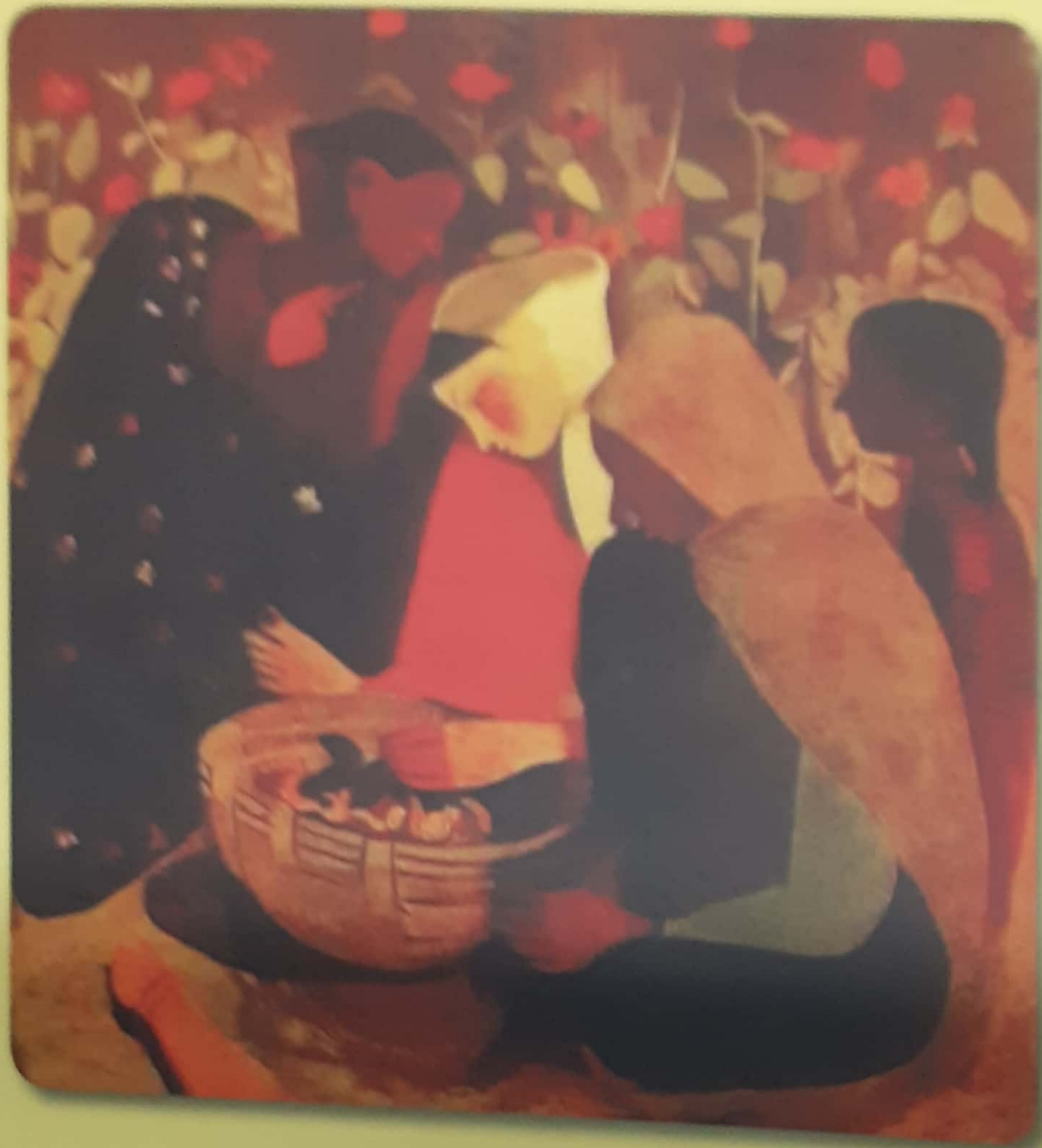


Women's Empowerment

A Challenge in the 21st Century



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Political Empowerment of Women: Challenges Encountered by Indian Women

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Women's empowerment is the continuous movement in which women develop and re-form into their best version of what they can be, do, and achieve in a situation that they formerly were deprived of. According to Naila Kabeer it is the process for women to redefine gender roles that allows for them to acquire the ability to choose between known alternatives which they were previously denied. There are numerous other doctrines describing women's empowerment for example, for one to be empowered, they must come from a position of disempowerment. Moreover, one must attain empowerment by herself rather than have it given to her by an outside party. Sarah Mosedale expressed her views that empowerment means people having the capability to make important decisions in their lives while also being able to act on them and thus, disempowerment is relative to it. Hence, empowerment is a process, and not a product. The whole nation can profit from the enactment of programmes and policies that promote women's empowerment. Empowerment of women is the need for the very progress of a society, as it improves both the quality and the quantity of human resources available for improvement. Empowerment is one of the main procedural concerns when addressing human rights and development. The Human Development and Capabilities Approach, the Millennium Development Goals, the Sustainable Development Goals, and other compulsory aims point to empowerment and participation as an essential step if a nation is to overcome the problems related to poverty and progress. Political empowerment means backing and creating policies that would best maintain gender equality and agency for women in both the public and private domains. Common methods that have been recommended are to make favourable action policies that have a quota for the number of women in policy making and parliament positions. The 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts, 1992 (CAAs) for the very first time made the base to offer representation to until now under represented or unrepresented categories of the community, including women, in rural and urban local self-government organisations.

To tell the truth, reservations for women and other categories were on the political agenda even during the independence movement. After independence, though measures were taken in the Municipal Acts for reservation of seats for SCs and STs, other backward classes and for women, measures were taken for nominations to guarantee their representation in the local governances. It was Balwant Rai Mehta Committee that recommended reservations for women in 1957 in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Afterwards, measures were taken to reserve a certain percentage of seats for women in different states although the percentage varied from state to state.

The number of women in the council is critical, but is not sufficient enough to make impact on the policies and decisions in the councils. It by itself does not empower women and require capacities to actively participate in mostly male dominated urban governance in the country. It requires follow-up actions like awareness building, training, sharpening the skills, motivation, building confidence, and so on. It requires capacity enhancement to engage in general and gender based governance issues. The urban development policies and programmes should be gender sensitive to get the expected outputs. The urban functionaries, both officials and elected, need to be gender sensitive to address and overcome burgeoning problems in the context of increased pace of urbanisation.

Martha Nussbaum showed how a major obstacle to women's ability to participate in politics is the threat of violence. Sexual violence in India is aggravated by problems of education and marriage. Women are sexually molested. Child marriage, domestic violence and low literacy rates have dropped Indian women's economic opportunities and aided in perpetuation of sexual violence in India. Though the Constitution of India removed gender and caste based inequalities, yet discrimination goes on to be a prevalent obstacle to women's political participation. A 2012 study by UN International Centre for Research on Women of 3,000 Indian women showed that the obstacles in participation, precisely in running for political office, is wide spread illiteracy, workloads within the home, and biased attitudes towards women as leaders. Biased attitude is noticeable in the restrictions forced on Indian women including little access to information and resources. Women have to depend on getting information from family or village members, stereotypically men. They also lack leadership skill due to the reality that they are laden with household responsibilities. The load of household responsibilities is a major cause

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