Interrogating Women's Leadership & Empowerment

Edited by *Omita Goyal*

India International Centre

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FOREWORD

The concept of women's empowerment is deeply embedded in our cultural heritage. In fact, I write this during the *Navratras*, the nine days which occur twice a year, in which the Goddess is widely worshipped by Hindus around the world, not as a spouse but in her own right. It is also interesting to recall that all the Hindu deities are invariably bracketed with a feminine figure whose name precedes them—Gauri-Shankar, Sita-Ram, Radha-Krishna and so on. Therefore, as far as the cultural aspect is concerned, the bulk of people in India should not have any difficulty with the concept of women's empowerment.

However, the social reality is entirely different. With a few exceptions, the woman has been relegated to a secondary and inferior position within most of the religions of India. Records of ill-treatment of women, the growing incidents of rape, and the general attitude of male domination continue to prevail. It is in this context that the contemporary movement of women's empowerment has to be viewed.

There are several dimensions of empowerment. There is a much-needed change in social attitudes which should respect women and the girl child, and which is dramatically illustrated by the growing gender imbalance even in the more affluent states. Then there is economic empowerment, and for this many of the new schemes that the government has launched in the last few years have been especially aimed at the women of India. They are encouraged to open their own bank accounts into which government grants can flow. Thirdly, there is educational empowerment. Although the percentage of girl students has considerably increased over the last decade, there is still a substantial imbalance, and the dropout rate of girl students is much higher than that of boys. One of the factors which is now being tackled is the absence of separate toilets for girls

in village schools, which are essential in order to retain girl students beyond the primary standard. Fourthly, medical facilities for safe delivery, widespread availability of contraceptive technology and nutritional inputs for pregnant and nursing mothers have also to be substantially increased.

These are just some of the aspects of women's empowerment, which this book seeks to address. The title, *Interrogating Women's Leadership and Empowerment*, shows an interesting spectrum of views. Politically, women played a major role in the freedom movement under Gandhiji and have also adorned the highest positions in the land from time to time. This fact has to be appreciated because it proves that our Constitution and electoral system give ample scope for women to rise to the top at the Centre and in the states.

The authors in this volume present an impressive array of intellectual insights into the various aspects of women's empowerment. Taken together, they bring clearly before us the whole array of challenges that confront India today. I need to stress that women's empowerment cannot be achieved without the full cooperation of men and, therefore, we must all work in unison to achieve the desired goals. It is interesting to note that on the issue of one-third reservation of women in Parliament, both the ruling party and the opposition party are, for once, in agreement.

KARAN SINGH

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PREFACE

When we began thinking about putting together a volume on the theme of women's leadership and empowerment, we realised we didn't have enough space within these pages to do it justice. This is not a definitive collection on women's empowerment and leadership, but it does encompass a wide range of views, often divergent, that look at the situation of women in, and their contribution to, politics, business, education, social and economic development, the women's movement, health, law, insurgency, art, music, dance, cinema, literature and craft. Governmental efforts through constitutional guarantees, capacity-building programmes and *poorna shakti*, or holistic empowerment as defined by the National Mission for Empowerment of Women, have worked alongside non-governmental and individual initiatives to set the empowerment process in motion. The women's movement, both by way of the expanding centres of women's studies and grassroots activism, has played a significant role in women's empowerment. But we cannot be complacent.

What constitutes empowerment and leadership? Is it equal access to education, employment and health? Political participation and decision making? Is it ownership of one's body and freedom of choice? Does empowerment also address marginalisation of women by caste, class and religion? A common strand that runs across the chapters in this volume is the very notion of empowerment (also its converse, 'disempowerment'), and its (re)definition.

It is hard to fathom why, in the 21st century, we still talk about the need to empower half the population of this country. India is a paradox. On the one hand, some of the earliest initiatives to educate women date back to the late 1800s. Some historical texts see the origins of the women's movements in India in the social reforms of the 19th century when the first women's organisations

were set up by both women and male social reformers. The Indian Constitution is not stagnant and unlike in many parts of the world, has seen several amendments, including within it laws relating to women's rights. On the other hand, we are still battling an adverse sex ratio, a high dropout rate and an inherently patriarchal society.

The chapters in this volume reflect this dichotomy, at the same time demonstrating how far we have come in our efforts towards empowering women. For instance, while women panchayat leaders are seen to play a more development-oriented, 'soft power' role than a political one, it is important to note that they are no longer powerless proxies for the men. While the number of women in the corporate sector is still less than desirable, women are entering non-traditional fields like banking and bio-technology. Examples of women and communities who have battled great odds to leave behind the constraints of tradition, either through the political route or through the arts, are many. An interesting fact comes from Ashish Khokar—in 1977, the then prime minister, Morarji Desai's nomination for the highest post of President of India was Rukmini Devi Arundale. Another concern that comes out in more than one chapter is the notion of the woman's body. It is unfortunate and shameful that sexual abuse and violence against women in situations of conflict are endemic. At the same time, we have illiterate Dalit labouring women who have attempted to transcend pain by developing an intellectual space of their own through painting.

This book is an unusual collection that expands the definition of empowerment to encompass several aspects of women's lives and professions. As the contributors illustrate, there is change—but there is still a long way to go.

OMITA GOYAL

INTRODUCTION

I

Though a popular buzzword since the 1980s, there has been little informed discussion on the term 'empowerment'. As the eminent sociologist Andre Beteille wrote, most analyses around the term so far have been more context-driven than theory-driven. It is important then to look at the context in which discussions over empowerment and indeed women's empowerment have arisen. On the whole, the context is one where there is a contradiction between 'a hierarchical social order and a democratic political system' (Beteille, 1999: 589), where the rights of citizenship and a democratic constitution founder against entrenched tradition and prejudice. The process of empowerment—which can be understood in many ways—aims at overcoming these disabilities through a range of strategies. The chapters in this unique volume encourage the reader to view the concept in the very many ways in which Indian women have become empowered. Some point to what remains unfinished if not ignored.

While empowerment 'may be invoked in virtually any context', be it human rights, basic needs, capacity-building, skill formation or overall economic security' (Beteille, 1999: 590), the meaning of this holdall term has nonetheless to be narrowed down. At a macro-political level, it can mean political participation and sharing in power. If one limits the discussion to the work space, it means a process of participation, awareness of rights and obligations as well as the growth of a sense of self-confidence and self-worth (Sreelakshmamma, 2008). Intra-familial dynamics point to yet other configurations of entitlements, negotiation and power sharing—Amartya Sen's impressive work over the past three decades being a case in point. Now, his classic theory of entitlements has ensured that the South Asian family can never be viewed as a democratic

space, but one of cooperative conflict, bargaining and stress (Sen, 1981, 1990).

Historically, in India, ideas about the empowerment of women gained credence after 1975, known as the International Year of Women; more specifically, this year had a particular salience in India as it coincided with the publication of the path-breaking *Towards Equality*, the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India. This report not only highlighted women's position in a range of fields but also quite pointedly asserted the need to strengthen their political, social and economic bases. In other words, it was essential to empower them and provide them with the means of gaining control over their lives. It meant a shift away from the welfarist model of growth that treated women as objects of munificence, doled out by the family, society and indeed government. Women needed to take charge of their lives, and this meant challenging the development from the above approach. Naila Kabeer has argued that empowerment questions the notions of selfhood into which girls and women are socialised; by bringing about a change in the 'distribution in material and symbolic resources and opportunities between women and men in the development process', it is possible to give women agency and the power to question accepted notions of selfhood (Kabeer, 1999). This can often mean something as quotidian as asserting the right to come out of the home, into mixed company. It becomes particularly relevant in the context of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution that brought thousands of women into the political process through Panchayati Raj (Baviskar and Mathew, 2009). Women who had not known the outside world have overnight become the repositories of power and authority.

Thus, the empowerment of women entails their visibility and ability to make choices; such choices may challenge the established power hierarchy not only within the home, but in society as well (Kabeer, 2010). This means the agency of a positive kind that can be transformative. Given women's overall subordinate position, they can also have what Kabeer calls 'passive agency', where they take action in a situation where there is little choice. An example of this would be organising a daughter's marriage when the decision of who the bridegroom should be is taken by the men in family. It is, however, the positive aspects of agency that constitute

empowerment. This necessarily means self-awareness, commitment to change and to involve oneself in participatory endeavours through building on one's latent talents as well as developing new skills, both in the sphere of personality and in the areas of work and employment.

Based on his extensive field work in rural West Bengal, Banerjee (1997) argued that this capacity-building places a heavy dependence on the self. In some senses, it is this meaning of empowerment which is the most relevant in the present context. The notion of capacity-building stresses individual growth as much, if not more than, as an external adjustment in the sharing of power and authority. Nonetheless, as enhancing individual capacity involves new skills as well as new ways of viewing oneself, the process may cause a woman to reflect on her situation, including a sense of autonomy or lack of it; it may also help her to work towards a better adjustment to domestic power relations as well as her attitude to a wider environment.

At the same time, at the interpersonal level, the empowerment of some may lead to the disempowerment of others or at any rate, a perception that they are being disempowered. This is particularly true of men within families who often feel threatened when women organise. Empowerment clearly leads to a better sense of self-worth, often through collective action that aims at, among other things, economic betterment. For empowerment is largely about 'ordinary, common people, rather than politicians, experts and other socially or culturally advantaged persons', an improvement in the quality of life is integral to an understanding of the term (Beteille, 1999: 590). Banerjee argues that there are indications that 'women exposed to some amount of mobilisation show great potentialities, receptiveness and defining capacities once the direction is appropriately conveyed' (Banerjee, 1993: 7). Often, the so-called illiterate women who are exposed to some amount of mobilisation show great potential and capacity for leadership. Women's organisations, Panchayati Raj institutions and even the State have facilitated the empowerment of women; various case studies in this volume bear testimony to this overarching fact.

There is enough evidence to show that the role of the Indian State has not been insignificant in the evolution of women's organisations and their differing goals. The relationship between the

two, however, tends to be ambivalent, and the government has often been challenged by women's organisations. Contentious issues range from policy to specific situations where the State is held responsible, for example, for not protecting women from crime or violence. While the Indian government cannot be characterised as a monolithic entity, which always speaks in a single voice on every issue concerning women, nonetheless, its efforts at addressing women's questions have had a long history. There are numerous and notable instances of the government's receptivity to voices, not only from the contemporary women's movement, but also from the 'welfare' agendas of the older women's organisations. On occasion, the State has been instrumental in raising women's issues and accordingly creating policies and programmes and setting up special organs within its administration for their implementation. All of these can be construed as measures taken by the State for the benefit of women's empowerment.

Issues such as the relationship between organisations and the State acquire a particular salience in the age of global economies. The State and its apparatus are in the process of being 'discursively transformed through neoliberal rhetoric and strategies and through grassroots praxis'. In this situation of flux, women's empowerment results in 'reconfiguring the relationships between the state and local actors, transforming development, and reshaping citizenship and popular politics...' (Sharma, 2010: xvi–vii). Sharma reiterated the well-known view that the neoliberal Indian State has little to offer to those at the margins of society; the middle classes and elites have been the gainers in a world where consumerism has grown exponentially.

It is against this backdrop of growing inequalities where fallacious arguments on how much is needed for a poor family to keep the wolf from the door sound particularly hollow that issues of empowerment become increasingly significant. As Satish Agnihotri points out in the present volume, there is a need for gender-sensitive versus gender-blind governance. It is not enough to carry out multitudinous surveys without disaggregating the data. Known for his work on the declining female sex ratio, Agnihotri regrets that those in charge of collecting and analysing statistics whether it be for the Integrated Child Development Scheme or on the health of young children often do not keep in mind the need to determine

differences based on gender in nutritional status or in access to services. Official myopia often works against attempts to facilitate the empowerment of women and girls. And in situations of ethnic conflict such as in Nagaland, women and children are often innocent victims; on the basis of a study in the Dhemaji district of Assam, Sanjoy Hazarika found that combatants were not security forces or organised militant groups but ethnic groups which 'saw threats from "the other" to their identity and control of land'; in such contexts, where survival is at stake, the empowerment of women becomes but a remote chimera. In fact, it becomes all the more necessary to look not only at conflict-management processes but also at legal reform as essential for an atmosphere where women will feel secure. Feminist lawyer Kirti Singh points out that while it was the gang rape of December 2013 'which forced a reluctant government to bring about change', the women's movement, various organisations and individuals have been agitating for gender-sensitive laws from the 1980s onwards. However, as her brief history of sexual assault laws shows, there is still a long way to go. While the notion of struggle is not absent in many accounts of women's quest for empowerment, a number of essays in this volume are success stories often moving out of the usual paradigm of power-sharing to other fields where women have become icons of success in a difficult environment.

II

The philosophical concept of women's empowerment and its practical implications has matured and developed considerably over the years; while political participation, economic self-reliance and social awareness would be the obvious parameters to judge 'levels' of empowerment, going back occasionally in time, this collection introduces us to women as craftspersons, dancers, singers, actors, litterateurs, businesswomen and doctors. These are, to use a cliché, symbols of emancipated Indian womanhood. But there are others too, those recently empowered by grassroots' organisations and State intervention. Some contributions paint with broad strokes, providing a macro-picture, while others introduce us to individual women and their genius or to institutions that became path-breakers. Familiar and somewhat conventional terms are used by most authors while a few introduce us to the world of gender budgeting and gender mainstreaming. From the 1980s onwards, discussions

around women's status in the South have relied on the well-known Women in Development (WID) theories. These have gradually been superseded by the more inclusive Gender and Development (GAD) approach that tackles the question of inequalities in power and looks to empowerment in all fields (Kabeer, 1995; Razavi and Miller, 1995). No matter which approach is adopted and by whom, the volume introduces us to empowered women in many fields, ranging from the political sphere where sharing in leadership remains a major issue to the delicate tracery of the Madhubani artist, imbued with a sense of inequality and the consequent search for self-expression.

The changing parameters of women's leadership are skilfully etched by Devaki Jain and Padmini Swaminathan, both significant actors in the theory and practice of the Indian women's movement. Jain (assisted by Deepshika Batheja) points out that the nature of women's leadership challenges existing notions of power and 'the concept of representation and leadership'. Women's study centres ('powerhouses and catalysts') and the recently anointed Internet age have expanded the parameters of debate and discourse while, as Swaminathan argues, certain organisations (in this case, the MV Foundation in Andhra Pradesh) have introduced gender mainstreaming where 'economic transformation [comes] with social emancipation'. Renana Jhabvala's insider account of the functioning of Self-employed Women's Organisation (SEWA) and case studies of individual women only goes to strengthen the belief that power-sharing is not alien to women. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India which reserves a third of seats for women in all elected local government bodies has been a historic step, bringing over a million women into the political sphere. It has interrogated the private–public dichotomy and forced discussion on issues such as women's traditional roles, familial expectations and changing responsibilities. J. Devika's study of women Panchayat members in Kerala gives a lie to the notion that it is governance by proxy. In fact, a new model of authority, that of 'gentle power', has emerged, one that has the full approval of men. Women get their way at the micro-political level by subtle, non-threatening strategies in keeping with established and acceptable notions of feminine behaviour. However, as Sudha Pai points out, when at the top, women politicians are as adept as men in the language and methods of negotiation and

power-brokering. At the margins, the problems are different and there are not many Mayawatis on the political stage. When it comes to participation in the public sphere, Dalit women, writes Gopal Guru in an insightful essay, have very specific problems: the stigma of caste has to contend with the patriarchal worldview of their men which attempts to keep them at the margins. Self-expression in the form of *Godna* paintings from the Madhubani district of Bihar and their distinct form of poetry such as the *ovie* of Maharashtra are powerful release mechanisms. The collective nature of labour is carried over to the field of creativity. There are exceptions though, such as the dictated biography of Viramma or Kumud Pawade's 1981 memoir. Feminist historian Uma Chakravarti discusses both, underlining the inherent violence of such lives described so well by Bama in *Karukku*.

Unlike most other collections on women's empowerment, contributions to *Interrogating Women's Leadership and Empowerment* go well beyond conventional understandings of enhancing women's strength and self-confidence through socio-political and economic means: a quick look at the history of a couple of centuries brings into focus early doctors, singers, dancers, actors and, of course, craftspersons. Paid and unpaid labour in agriculture and agriculture-related activities accounts for the time and energy of the largest number of Indian women. A close second is the crafts sector. It is only in recent years that there has been an awareness of the need to hone existing skills of craftspersons as well as train them in new designs and techniques. Though as early as 1919, Rabindranath Tagore introduced crafts into the curriculum at Kala Bhawana, it is only less than a decade ago that Kala Raksha Vidyalaya in Kutch and the Handloom Weaving School in Maheshwar were set up to teach traditional artisans the use of alternate dyes, innovative weaving techniques and so on (Sethi in this volume). If middle-class imaginations have rarely stretched to the benefits of training craftspeople, there was no lack of interest and indeed initiatives in training girls of their own background. In 1886, Kadambini Basu and Anandibai Joshi became the first women doctors of the British Indian Empire only because their husbands took advantage of the facilities available to young women (Karlekar in this volume). Such facilities had taken firm root by the end of the 19th century, first in the three Presidencies and then in other parts of the country.