



The Woman's Question in India: Reading the Trajectory of the Five-Year Plans

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Abstract

The concept of women's empowerment, while nascent in its inception as a philosophical underpinning of social policy, is imbued with an ancient heritage that resonates with profound meaning and a protracted struggle. The modern era of women's empowerment began in the second half of the 1970s, when its discourse thrived because to the steadfast campaigning of Third World feminists and the unrelenting initiatives of women's organizations. Manifesting as a theoretical framework, women's empowerment accentuates the pervasive subjugation endured by women. The pivotal import of women in the trajectory of national development was duly acknowledged by the Indian government since the advent of the inaugural Five-Year Plan (1951-1956). Nevertheless, the realization of women's inclusivity in the paradigm of comprehensive growth can only be attained upon the transformation of inclusive democracy from myth to tangible actuality. Initially delineated as beneficiaries of welfare and cataloged as a vulnerable stratum of society, women traversed an evolving narrative within the ambit of successive Five-Year Plans. This seminal exposition endeavours to elucidate and accentuate the notable strides achieved in the sphere of women's empowerment, as exemplified by the strategic implementation of the Five-Year Plans within the Indian context.

Keywords-Indian governance, Women empowerment, political strategies, five-year planning.

Introduction

The concept of empowerment, though commonly invoked, often lacks precise definition, thus regrettably succumbing to the perils of overuse and conceptual ambiguity. At its foundation, empowerment is the act of bestowing power on individuals, allowing the vulnerable to cultivate strength, nurturing the development of self-esteem, facilitating the development of assertiveness and confidence in oneself, encouraging them to stand up to oppression and unfairness, and advocating their rightful entitlements [1]. Individuals who have been marginalised or disenfranchised regain control of their own life via empowerment, actively participating in endeavours that have a direct and significant influence on their well-being. This intricate phenomenon encompasses various dimensions, encompassing socioeconomic, political, and psychological factors, all intricately interwoven to generate a comprehensive notion of empowerment [2]. The concept of women's empowerment has permeated the vocabulary of scholars, advocates, professionals, and policymakers, featuring prominently in a multitude of seminars, workshops, and conferences at local, national, and global



platforms. It has become a ubiquitous topic of discussion, reflecting the widespread recognition and importance attributed to empowering women in diverse spheres of society. In the discourse surrounding the new millennium and its attendant concerns, women's upliftment stands as an unequivocal imperative. The prevailing belief posits that endowing women with agency and enlightenment possesses the transformative potential to ameliorate the very fabric of our global community. Indeed, the destiny of women hinges upon their tireless quest for the realization of their rights. Their resolute struggle serves as the linchpin for forging a brighter future, wherein equality, justice, and dignity become indelible hallmarks of our shared existence.

Throughout the annals of time, women in India have borne the weighty yoke of discrimination, exploitation, and an assortment of pernicious forms of harassment, intricately weaving a tapestry of intricate challenges deeply ingrained in the fabric of society. As the fairer sex constitutes nearly half of the nation's populace, their inexorable journey towards progress and prosperity becomes inextricably interwoven with the holistic development of the country at large. In cognizance of the monumental gravity of this matter, our astute planners and sagacious policymakers have steadfastly accorded paramount primacy to the advancement of women. Since the momentous dawn of independence, concerted endeavors have been undertaken to safeguard women's rights through fortified constitutional provisions and the strategic implementation of socio-economic initiatives devised to uplift their station. Moreover, a plethora of steadfast voluntary organizations have indefatigably espoused the noble cause of women's empowerment. Alas, despite the collective forays undertaken by the governmental and non-governmental realms alike, a palpable proportion of women continue to grapple with the deleterious deprivation of their elemental rights, compelling us to urgently propel forth unwavering action and transformative measures [3].

The research methodology employed in this study relies on the utilization of secondary sources of data. Extensive exploration of diverse secondary sources, including books, scholarly journals, relevant articles and reputable magazines, has been undertaken to gather the necessary information and insights for this research endeavour. These sources have been carefully selected to ensure their credibility, reliability, and relevance to the research topic at hand. Through a thorough analysis and synthesis of the information derived from these secondary sources, this research intends to add to the current corpus of literature on the topic.

Indian Women and Five Year Plans

The Indian economy, spanning the years from 1947 to 2017, operated on the bedrock of planning, meticulously executed through a series of Five Year Plans. These plans were intricately crafted, meticulously executed, and vigilantly overseen by the Planning Commission (1951-2014) and subsequently by the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog (2015-2017). Within this framework, the Prime Minister assumed the mantle of ex-officio Chairman, with a nominated Deputy Chairman holding the esteemed rank of Cabinet Minister. Montek Singh Ahluwalia, an erudite statesman, notably served as the final Deputy Chairman of the Commission until his resignation on the 26th of May, 2014. Noteworthy among these plans is the Eleventh Five Year Plan, which culminated in March 2012, while the Twelfth Plan currently remains underway, steering the nation towards its envisioned future [4].

Provisions pertaining to women gained remarkable impetus during the mid-1980s. In the Indian context, a watershed moment for women's cause materialized with the inception of the Sixth Five Year



Plan (1980-85), which served as an epoch-making juncture. It was within this epoch that the notion of "women and development" was ingeniously introduced, underscoring the indispensability of an integrative paradigm that transcended mere fragmentary strategies.

Astutely cognizant of the imperative to empower women, subsequent Five Year Plans ardently embraced the centrality of their inclusion and progression. Notably, an array of meticulously designed programs and schemes were deftly executed to engender women's empowerment across successive Five Year Plans. These endeavors deftly encompassed diverse facets, encompassing the spheres of economic autonomy and educational advancement, adroitly grappling with the fundamental conundrums that pervaded the landscape of women's struggle. Through these sagacious and sustainable initiatives, the enigmatic quest for women's empowerment found resounding resonance, offering a veritable tapestry of progress and metamorphosis [5].

The First Five Year Plan

In the inaugural phase of the Five-Year Plans, specifically, the First Five-Year Plan spanning from 1951 to 1956, the focus on women's development primarily revolved around welfare-oriented initiatives. A pivotal milestone in this pursuit was the establishment of the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) in 1953, emblematic of the welfare-centric perspective in addressing women's issues. Notably, this board mirrored the ethos of community development, thereby introducing the innovative concept of organizing women into Mahila Mandals or Women's Clubs. Consequently, workers in community development, in close partnership with the rural gentry, extended their outreach to encompass rural women who were a part of the Community Development Programmes [6].

The Second Five Year Plan

The inception of the Second Five-Year Plan spanning from 1956 to 1961 marked a pivotal juncture where it seamlessly converged with the comprehensive strategy of intensive agricultural development. Within the overarching framework of this plan, the welfare-oriented paradigm that encompassed women's issues continued to hold sway. Recognizing the significance of women's development, the plan accorded paramount importance to the establishment of Mahila Mandals, serving as dynamic hubs at the grassroots level to propel women's progress.

A distinguishing characteristic of the plan was its astute recognition of the societal biases and constraints faced by women. It underscored the pressing need to mobilize women as productive contributors to the workforce, while simultaneously safeguarding their rights and well-being. The plan ardently advocated for the protection of women against exploitative and perilous labor conditions, emphasizing the provision of essential maternity benefits and the establishment of reliable childcare facilities to alleviate the burden on working mothers.

Furthermore, the Second Five-Year Plan ardently championed the tenets of gender parity by steadfastly advocating for the enforcement of equitable remuneration for commensurate labor. It envisioned a progressive trajectory where women would be afforded equitable avenues to vie for esteemed positions of authority, surpassing the limitations imposed by archaic gender norms. Cognizant of the profound impact of education and skill development, the plan emphasized the pressing exigency to endow women with the indispensable proficiencies and erudition to emerge as formidable contenders within the realms of the professional sphere.

In essence, the Second Five-Year Plan embraced a comprehensive and inclusive approach to women's development within the broader context of intensive agricultural advancement. By prioritizing the



formation of Mahila Mandals and advocating for essential protective measures, equal pay, and enhanced training opportunities, the plan laid a strong foundation for empowering women and fostering their meaningful participation in India's socioeconomic fabric.

The Third Five Year Plan

In the domain of societal advancement, the Third Five-Year Plan, spanning the period from 1961 to 1966, marked a seminal turning point by accentuating the paramount significance of female education as a catalytic strategy. Noteworthy was the substantial allocation of resources towards bolstering welfare services in rural areas and implementing comprehensive educational initiatives. With regards to healthcare, the plan demonstrated a resolute commitment to enhancing maternal and child welfare provisions, fostering health-consciousness through targeted educational campaigns, promoting nutritional advancements, and advocating for family planning initiatives. By prioritizing the holistic well-being of women and children, these concerted efforts aimed to pave the way towards societal advancement and the empowerment of marginalized communities [8].

The Fourth Five Year Plan

The Fourth Five-Year Plan, encompassing the period from 1969 to 1974, placed utmost significance on the enhancement of women's education as a pivotal element within its comprehensive policy framework. Recognizing the family unit as the cornerstone of societal functioning, it bestowed paramount importance on the immunization of young children and the provision of supplementary nourishment for children, expectant mothers, and nursing mothers. Concurrently, the Central Social Welfare Board spearheaded the implementation of diverse programs aimed at fostering the well-being of women, encompassing adult education initiatives and socio-economic schemes geared towards empowering women and elevating their socio-economic standing [8].

The Fifth Five Year Plan

The advent of the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974-79) heralded a profound transformation in the paradigm governing women's development, transcending the conventional realm of "welfare" and embracing a more holistic and dynamic "development" approach. This shift was necessitated by the pressing need to confront the intricate challenges confronting families and the pivotal roles women play within them. The innovative strategy aimed to harmoniously merge welfare initiatives with progressive developmental services, cognizant of the indispensable significance of empowering women through avenues of income generation and protective measures. A pivotal recommendation underscored the implementation of functional literacy programs, meticulously equipping women with indispensable skills and knowledge to orchestrate a metamorphosis in their roles as homemakers. Notably, the health programs were strategically devised to establish robust public health facilities, seamlessly integrated with family planning and nutrition services, thereby catering to the unique needs of vulnerable cohorts such as children, expectant mothers, and lactating women [9]. In synchrony with these endeavors, the plan coincided fortuitously with the International Women's Decade and the seminal release of the "Towards Equality" report by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI). Tasked with an exhaustive examination of women's rights and status, the CSWI adroitly dissected the multifarious facets of evolving social and economic landscapes, identifying disconcerting trends. Egregious examples included the lamentable decline in the sex ratio, perilously lower life expectancies, distressingly elevated rates of infant and maternal mortality, the regrettably dwindling workforce participation, and the persistently pervasive specter of illiteracy [10].



The Sixth Five-Year Plan

The advent of the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974-79) marked a watershed moment in the trajectory of women's development, transcending the traditional confines of "welfare" and embracing a comprehensive and dynamic "development" paradigm. This paradigm shift was propelled by the imperative of addressing the complex challenges facing families and the pivotal roles played by women within them. The visionary strategy sought to synergize welfare initiatives with progressive developmental services, recognizing the vital importance of empowering women through avenues of income generation and protective measures. A momentous proposition was put forth to develop functional literacy programs, which aimed to systematically educate women, empowering them with the skills and knowledge to undergo a profound shift in their roles as homemakers. Notably, the health programs were meticulously designed to establish robust public healthcare systems, seamlessly integrating reproductive health, family planning, and nutritional services to cater to the unique needs of vulnerable populations such as children, expectant mothers, and nursing women [9]. Concurrently, this plan coincided opportunistically with the International Women's Decade and the seminal release of the "Towards Equality" report by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI). Entrusted with a comprehensive examination of women's rights and status, the CSWI astutely dissected the multifaceted dimensions of evolving social and economic landscapes, revealing alarming trends. Glaring examples encompassed the lamentable decline in the sex ratio, alarmingly low life expectancies, distressingly high rates of infant and maternal mortality, the regrettable erosion of workforce participation, and the persistent specter of illiteracy [10]

The Seventh Five Year Plan

The advent of the Seventh Five-Year Plan (1985-90) witnessed the operationalization of the overarching principles of equity and empowerment espoused by the International Decade for Women. This transformative plan diligently endeavored to extend welfare measures to all segments of society, with particular emphasis on the marginalized and underprivileged, notably women. A pivotal stride in this endeavor entailed the identification and promotion of "beneficiaries-oriented programs" across various developmental sectors, designed to directly empower women. Women Mahila Mandals were established as inclusive forums for women's participation and collective action. Numerous Art and Craft centers were inaugurated to amplify employment prospects for women, harnessing their artistic talents and skills. In 1987, the Support to Training-cum-Employment for Women (STEP) initiative was launched, aiming to enhance the skill sets of women and bolster their employment opportunities. Moreover, specialized training-cum-production centers for women were established, equipping them with the necessary skills for self-reliance and independence [12].

The Eighth Five Year Plan

The implementation of the Eighth Five-Year Plan in 1992 was a landmark moment, reflecting an important change in the approach to development by stressing the empowerment of women. This revolutionary strategy promises to eliminate any unintentional discrimination of women, ensuring that they are not left behind in acquiring the numerous benefits of progress in different sectors. It ardently pushed for the formation of an engaging framework in which women would be recognised as equal individuals, empowered with the agency and competence to actively contribute to the overall development fabric. The strategy envisioned to break down deep-rooted barriers and usher in an age of inclusion, when women's empowerment would act as a powerful catalyst driving society to new frontiers of growth [13].



The Ninth Five Year Plan

The enactment of the Ninth Five-Year Plan in April 1997 heralded the dawn of a new era, distinguished by an invincible commitment to key objectives such as women's empowerment and active public participation in strategic initiatives planning and execution. This landmark plan identified the critical role of women's rights in fostering comprehensive growth and advocated for an inclusive framework that accessed collective wisdom and wide engagement. The strategy aspired to create an enabling environment in which individuals could build their own futures and realise their full potential by accentuating the importance of people's engagement. The Ninth Five-Year Plan set the basis for a more equal and participative society through this holistic strategy, guided by the concepts of empowerment and inclusive growth. Notably, the approach paper underscored the paramount importance of women's empowerment as a central objective, encapsulating the notion of providing women with choices and unfettered access to seize these transformative opportunities. Crucially, a supportive ecosystem spanning the realms of home, education, faith, governance, and the workplace must be meticulously crafted to facilitate women's progress at every stage of their journey. A resounding clamor for comprehensive vocational training initiatives reverberated, driven by the imperative to enable women's active participation beyond the confines of their households. Moreover, the provision of essential childcare services, hostels, and affordable housing emerged as indispensable prerequisites to enable women's unfettered engagement beyond domestic realms. The Ninth Five-Year Plan decisively endeavored to assimilate concerns of women within the hallowed corridors of policy formulation, epitomizing a profound commitment to fostering gender equity and inclusive development [14]

Tenth Five Year Plan

The Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002-2007) ushered in a realm of ambitious targets, meticulously designed to elevate the status of women to unprecedented heights. Foremost among these targets was the Swyamsidha programme, an enhanced rendition of the Indira MahilaYojna, which endeavored to mobilize women into Self-Help Groups (SHGs), thereby empowering them with income-generating avenues. Moreover, this transformative initiative sought to facilitate women's access to a plethora of vital services encompassing literacy, healthcare, non-formal education, and water supply, among others.

Embedded within the fabric of governance, the United Progressive Alliance Government's National Common Minimum Programme (NCMP) enshrined the fundamental tenet of women's empowerment across political, educational, economic, and legal spheres. The Women's Component Plan (WCP) played a seminal role in guaranteeing that a minimum of 30 percent of funds and advantages were specifically allocated for women across various schemes under ministries and departments dedicated to their well-being. However, an undeniable disparity tainted the formulation and implementation of the Plan itself, with women noticeably underrepresented in decision-making processes. The WCP, in many instances, appeared as an afterthought, merely appended to existing development programs and projects. Thus, it becomes imperative to first fathom the actual experiences of women in their quest for self-empowerment, utilizing these invaluable insights as a benchmark for progress. To breathe life into women's grassroots political participation, a visionary approach entails endowing them with the agency to monitor and audit programs and schemes at the Panchayat level, facilitated through the establishment of local committees. In the face of pervasive patriarchal norms and the consequent



marginalization of women's voices in decision-making processes, elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) may encounter significant constraints when attempting to independently exercise their rights and effectively fulfill their duties. At each crossroads, a concerted endeavor must be made to amplify involvement of women in the formulation as well as execution of development planning. Only through such inclusive engagement can gender equity imperatives be effectively addressed, fostering a transformative impact that reverberates throughout the lives of women.

Eleventh Five-Year Plan

The Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2007-2012) resounds with an impassioned plea, urging us to confront the pervasive and formidable gender divide that persists in our society. It advocates for an unwavering commitment to undertake targeted and concerted endeavors aimed at eradicating this deep-rooted malady, thereby fostering an inclusive and enabling milieu where women can triumphantly achieve economic, political, and social empowerment. The plan calls for a collective determination to dismantle the barriers that impede women's progress, embracing a transformative vision that empowers them to rise above societal constraints and realize their full potential in all spheres of life. Yet, it must be acknowledged that previous plans have also expressed similar concerns regarding the gender divide. Within the framework of the Eleventh Plan, the plan for empowering women is channeled into three key areas: combating gender-based violence, fostering economic upliftment, and improving the health of women. The urgent need to create an atmosphere where women might feel secure and free from violence presented the plan with one of its greatest hurdles. In order to address issues like female foeticide, physical assault, human trafficking, discrimination based on gender, and domestic violence, it was necessary to organize ongoing campaigns. Furthermore, the Eleventh Plan recognized the intrinsic link between the health of a nation and the health of its women. It endeavored to curtail the prevalence of anemia and malnutrition among adolescent girls, recognizing that by breaking the cycle of ill-health and infant mortality, significant strides towards a healthier society could be achieved [15]. The government formed a committee of "feminist" economists to ensure gender-sensitive distribution of governmental funds within the framework of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan, which was a noteworthy move. Apart from identifying notable trends relevant to women in the economy and advocating policy steps to incorporate them into the growth plan of action, this pioneering group painstakingly examined the criteria that were used to evaluate accomplishment, both at the sectoral and microeconomic levels. Their invaluable insights and recommendations aided in the formulation of more sensitive indicators that aptly reflect the nuances of gender issues [16].

Twelfth Five-Year Plan

The Twelfth Five-Year Plan, titled "Accelerating, Sustainable, and Inclusive Growth," sought to challenge the entrenched power dynamics that favored men and relegated women to subordinate roles and limited opportunities. With an ambitious growth target of 8.2%, this visionary plan placed paramount importance on dismantling gender disparities and empowering women.

In accordance with the Twelfth Five-Year Plan, the Planning Commission vigorously advocated for tailored provisions and preferential treatment for single women, particularly those who consciously opted for an independent lifestyle. The plan fervently championed the active involvement of women in vital sectors such as agriculture and animal husbandry, endeavoring to create an enabling environment conducive to their progress.



In formulating policies and schemes for the Twelfth Five-Year Plan, a meticulous and nuanced understanding of women's unique needs was imperative. The plan steadfastly focused on crucial domains including healthcare, education, urbanization, and governance, recognizing their pivotal role in fostering comprehensive and sustainable development.

Conclusion

In essence, it can be succinctly deduced that the myriad welfare initiatives embarked upon by the government serve as a beacon of hope, aiming to emancipate women from the shackles of societal inequities and injustice. The Five Year Plans in India have invariably accorded paramount importance to the welfare of women, endeavoring to foster their holistic development and facilitate their empowerment. A plethora of programs and policies have been meticulously devised and implemented by the government, bearing testament to its unwavering commitment to women's advancement. These initiatives encompass a broad spectrum of domains, encompassing education, healthcare, economic autonomy, and societal inclusion. By strategically targeting these pivotal areas, the government aspires to forge an enabling environment wherein women can flourish, unfettered by constraints, and realize their true potential. However, notwithstanding the commendable strides made thus far, there exist areas that necessitate persistent vigilance and proactive intervention. The government must exhibit unwavering determination, staying acutely attuned to the perpetually shifting needs and concerns of women, and firmly overcoming the persistent obstacles that obstruct their advancement and curtail their unrestricted involvement in the tapestry of society. Moreover, it is of paramount importance to recognize that the endeavor to achieve gender parity and foster women's empowerment is an arduous and protracted odyssey, devoid of facile solutions or transient victories. It warrants an unwavering commitment from all stakeholders, be it policymakers, communities, or individuals, to galvanize concerted efforts. By fostering collaborative synergy, we can collectively shape a society that upholds the indomitable rights and aspirations of women, ushering in an era characterized by equitable opportunities and social justice.

In summation, while the government's commendable welfare initiatives have propelled women's empowerment to unprecedented heights, the expedition is far from over. The government must remain resolute in its unwavering resolve to uplift women, confront the lingering challenges, and engender a society where gender equality reigns supreme in all spheres of existence. Only through a concerted and inclusive approach can we truly engender a transformation that empowers women and paves the way for a more equitable and prosperous nation, wherein every individual can thrive and flourish. The government must exhibit unwavering determination, staying acutely attuned to the perpetually shifting needs and concerns of women, and firmly overcoming the persistent obstacles that obstruct their advancement and curtail their unrestricted involvement in the tapestry of society. Moreover, it is of paramount importance to recognize that the endeavour to achieve gender parity and foster women's empowerment is an arduous and protracted odyssey, devoid of facile solutions or transient victories.



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