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Globalisation: Empowering Women through Information. Impact of Information Availability and Use in Society on Women

Globalisation and Indian Women : Problems, Possibilities and Information needs – An Overview

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Abstract

Globalisation can be a major force for prosperity only if it is backed by adequate national policies and conducive social and economic environment.

This paper will give an overview of what the forces of globalisation have in store for the women of India. A large group of working women of India are in the rural and unorganised sectors. Socially the majority of Indian women are still tradition bound and are in a disadvantageous position. Since globalisation is opening up the Indian economy suddenly at a very high speed, without the required economic and social policies to provide the much required safety net, women who have been involved with production in the traditional ways, have to cope with numerous problems and yet try to avail of the opportunities which an open economy promises. The changing scenario will diversify the information needs of women at different levels.

Keywords : Globalization-Indian women; Social condition-Indian women; Economic condition - women; globalisation - economic problems; globalisation-social problems;

globalisation-advantages; information needs-Indian women; information needs-urban women; information needs-rural women.

Globalisation is a fact of life, which has come to stay. It is expected to be a major force for prosperity. The essentials of the new economic policy are:

- a) Privatisation
- b) Globalisation
- c) Modernisation
- d) Improving productivity and grow the rate.

The Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) undertaken to implement these objectives will require:

- Decontrol and deregulate
- Freedom of entry of foreign goods and investment
- Adoption of market friendly fiscal exchange, trade and credit policies
- Cut back in public expenditure
- Adoption of new technologies
- Concentration of government investment in infrastructure building , education, health etc.
- Exit policy
- Withdrawal of subsidies.

This paper tries to give an overview of what is in store for women in India in this process of globalisation and what type of information needs are likely to evolve due to this major change in the new socio- economic scenario.

The new Structural Adjustment Programmes to usher in globalisation in traditional economies like India will reach the expected goal only IF the process of globalisation is well backed by properly planned national policies in a conducive social and economic environment.

Globalisation is a double edged process as far as women are concerned. On the one hand, majority of women in India and other developing countries find themselves stripped off the benefit of social security , government subsidy protection of labour rights and than safety nets. On the other hand there are possibilities of better education facilities and opportunities at the transnational sense which are very attractive to the privileged few. It is however necessary to understand that effective development requires full integration of women in the development process as agents of change as well as beneficiaries because Indian women can be utilized as development resources in many ways.

Problems encountered by Indianwomen over the ages:-

- Patriarchy and social pressures.
- Caste based discrimination and social restrictions
- Inadequate access to productive resources
- Poverty
- Insufficient advancement facilities
- Powerlessness

These basic problems have plagued the lives of Indian women with little respite. But in the new circumstances created by SAP for globalisation are diverse and encompass all aspects of women's lives in India. It has affected both the quantity and the quality of work available to the majority of women in India.

- The traditional role of women in agriculture, livestock and animal husbandry, Khadi and village industries including handicrafts, handlooms fisheries, etc, is being undermined because mechanization and automation is becoming prevalent in the market based economy which will adversely affect the village based traditional economy.
- Privatisation and reduction of public services will reduce regular employment opportunities for women.
- Globalisation has increased the number of low paid, part-time and exploitative jobs.
- Occupational sex segregation will be a stark reality in the open economy. This will tend to result in worse working condition, lower pay and inferior career opportunities.
- Curtailment of state provisions in child care, community care and social security, will increase the dual burden of employment and family responsibilities for women in general.
- With male migration on the increase from the rural to urban sectors, the women have to bear the triple burden of caring, farming and paid employment in the rural sector.
- In the neo liberal work practices, contract work, unsocial hours of work,, cooperative practices, payment by result make it very difficult for women to cope with their multiple responsibilities.
- With the disappearing social and financial safety nets and government subsidy, the poverty alleviation programmes, universal education, and woman oriented health programmes will be adversely affected.
- Trade liberalisation will allow MNCS to enter into food processing and other feminised industries which will lead to reduction in low skilled women labour.
- Privatisation of education and training will increase the cost of getting educated. When family budgets are readjusted, the female children will be the main casualty because most of the resources will be spent to educate the male children.
- Migration of women specially for economic reasons often give rise to exploitation and trafficking in women at the local, regional and global levels.
- Open market economy leads to price rise in food and other basic necessities. Women who have to directly deal with family subsistence have to cope with such changes.

Basically liberalisation and globalisation of the economy will marginalise majority of women in India due to reduction of employment opportunities, reduction of wages, casualisation of jobs and women workers, exclusion from the modernized production process due to lack of education and training.

Possibilities and Opportunities

On the positive side globalisation has contributed to bring about welcome changes in the lives of women who have been able to avail of the opportunities, which have opened up in the various sectors of development. These are:

- Prospects of higher and quality education have become feasible for those women who can afford them, economically and socially.
- Employment in technological and other advanced sectors, which have global bearing, has opened up for suitably qualified women.
- With changing attitude towards women, especially in the urban areas, women enjoy more egalitarian set of gender relationship.
- Augmentation of women's movements through exposures at the international level will help bring about major changes in the economic, social and political lives of women.
- Reduction in gender inequalities will have positive effect on women's empowerment in the socio-economic context.
- Attitudinal changes towards women's role in the family due to good education, benefits of family planning and health care, child care, good job opportunities etc. will surely help in the development of more confident and healthy women.
- Positive approach to economic and cultural migration will facilitate women to be exposed to better prospects at the international level.

Steps to cope with the changing scenario:

It is seen that the situation facing the majority of Indian women is far from positive. However efforts are underway to circumvent many of these problems through governmental and the non- governmental programmes. Both the government and NGO's seem to be aware of the fact that the globalization process require proper focus on rural development, education, health and child care and proper gainful employment for the underprivileged at the initial stages.

Since poverty alleviation programmes are the main responsibilities of the Government, there are direct and sector wise schemes. Some of the important schemes are:

- Public Distribution system for food security
- Work security through various schemes
- Health schemes and services
- Child care schemes
- Credit schemes
- Insurance schemes

There are also sector wise schemes through Small Farmers Development Agency and other schemes of the Department of Agriculture, schemes of the Dairy Development Boards in the dairy sector, schemes of Forest Corporation in the forestry sector etc. The main goal of the Department of Women and Child Development is to empower women and to bring them within the purview of the mainstream development process.

Also the capacities and capabilities of women addressing their own development have been the main focus of important NGOs and women's organisations. Innovative approaches for poverty alleviation such as savings, credit, and asset creation for poor women have evolved in India as well as in

other developing countries. These experiments have been able to organise poor women to-

- strengthen their capacity to survive
- meet their social needs
- enter into income generating activities
- increase their savings
- utilise the savings along with available credit
- improve their socio-economic conditions and that of their families
- sustain the process

NGOs such as Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Ahmedabad, Working Women's Forum (WWF) in Madras, Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), New Delhi etc have done commendable work in these directions. The Government departments have also given such experiments the necessary boost through the support for expansion in many ways.

The Role of Information in Rural development process

It is believed that the modern day phenomenon of Information and Communication Technology is the key to information flow for development. Especially in the Globalization and liberalization scenario, ICT can surely act as the major component in the developmental process.

In the World Development Report 2000-2001 it is observed that the spread of relevant information through technology will help in bridging the gaps between the information haves and the have nots. This will be a major step towards poverty reduction. India has seen a number of experiments to wire the rural sector to provide the right information to the right person at the right time and place.

In Rajasthan, the village named Neyla has the Information kiosk 'Rajnidhi' which is a project to use ICT especially the Internet to replace traditional form of governance with more open and responsive service delivery system. Gyandoot a prominent information facilitation programme in Madhya Pradesh has connected many villages through an intranet and has kiosks called Soochanalayas.

The M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation have set up Knowledge Centres which give access to information on Government programmes well as information relevant to fishing. There is farmer bazaar. com in Punjab for marketing the rural produce. The Warna Wired Village Project of the Kolhapur and Sangli districts of Maharashtra is a joint venture of the Government organization NIC and the Maharashtra State.

Most of these projects disseminate information meant for the disadvantaged groups which includes:

- Government circulars/notifications regarding programmes of assistance
- Leaflets released by NGOs about their programmes to spread awareness among the rural poor
- Public health bulletins especially for family planning, health and childcare etc.

Some of these ICT based information system deal with wide ranging topics such as

- Agriculture produce market rates
- Copies of land records
- On line registration of applications
- On line public grievance filing
- Rural e-mail
- Village auction sites
- On line matrimonial sites
- Information pertaining to government programmes
- Career counselling service
- Technical expertise programmes regarding agriculture, animal husbandry, health, etc.
- Online application forms
- Weather information for the fishing community.

Some of these programs also use digital media clubbed with audio and video capabilities to give access to information to those who cannot read.

Information needs of Women

The programmes mentioned above are efforts to make available relevant information to the rural sector and specially to the disadvantaged groups.

Women being the lowest in the socio-economic rung should be given the privilege of being one of the most important recipients of information meant to reduce the socio-economic gap.

What happens at the ground level

- All these commendable projects act as information supply agents which do not deal with information demands of special groups such as women .
- The information disseminated through most of these programs still caters to the English educated middle class. However there are efforts to give Hindi and regional language facilities in many programs But the slant is still on the educated and literate few.
- The information, thus disseminated and are often not need based. Such information are also not professionally organized for proper access and dissemination in the ICT environment.

Information Needs of Women

Information needs of women in the new globalized environment are as diverse as the socio- economic scenario. Treating women, as a monolithic group will over simplify their information needs. Within women's group itself, globalisation has created the haves and the have nots i.e those who are in an advantageous position due to globalisation and those relegated further into disadvantaged position under the new economic policy. The information needs will also differ accordingly.

The urban educated women need information mainly pertaining to:

- Research
- Educational opportunities including prospects abroad

- Career advancement facilities
- Job/ employment prospects in India and abroad
- Matrimonials
- Fashion and market values
- Health and child care facilities which includes sexual and reproductive information
- Art and entertainment
- Social support system for working women
- Legal rights and provisions

Urban lower middle class women however will specially need information on :

- In -expensive educational facilities
- Career advancement and job opportunities in the city itself
- Matrimonial within the restrictions of caste and class
- Inexpensive health and childcare
- Inexpensive social support systems for working women
- Legal rights and provisions against social injustice, domestic violence, dowry system etc.

A large chunk of women who have been adversely affected by the globalization process are the poor urban slum dwellers and women. To say the least they are the most marginalised people in the urban sector. Their information needs are only for subsistence. They need to know about-

- Health services and child care facilities which are available free of cost.
- Job opportunities in the low paid informal sector including domestic services
- Housing availability specially in slums
- Free educational facilities for their children specially for boys
- Information regarding Govt. programmes for the poor and how to deal with the procedure
- Legal provisions against sexual harassment, domestic violence and social injustice.

Information needs of women in the Rural sector

Once again women have to be divided on the basis of economic and social positions in the rural society to understand their information needs.

Elite women in the rural sector are mainly from the landed gentry class or from the highly sophisticated politically important families. They are also usually from the upper castes. Their information needs are akin to that of the urban elite women excepting for the fact that they often are passive viewers in the changing socio-economic scenario because they are bound by the upper caste traditions where patriarchy rules supreme.

The rural educated middle class women are more prone to change. They are in the process of gradually breaking the caste and class barriers and are working towards better education and economic independence. They are in urgent need of information regarding their new entitlements-

- Educational opportunities outside the village
- Job opportunities in both formal and informal sectors

- Govt. assistance programs for career advancement within the restriction of traditions
- Health services including sexual reproductive health
- Modern child care facilities
- Legal provisions to counter sexual harassment, domestic violence and social injustice.

The largest group, which has been marginalized from getting any need based information is the rural poor. Though this is the most active group of women in the rural sector, they have never been specially considered for information dissemination.

Information system specially designed for the rural poor has to be need based because this group has been worst affected by the process of globalisation.

Their information needs will encompass their economic, social and familial roles. Therefore the system must include:

- Agricultural assistance programmes
- Sector specific assistance programmes
- Technical training facilities i.e. hands-on training
- Traditional and new job opportunities
- Health programs specially family planning and reproduction
- Children's development programmes
- Prices and market information
- Environment and its implications
- Water and soil management
- Adult education and literacy programs
- Educational opportunities for children
- Migration facilities/ possibilities

Who gives information to women?

There has been no research conducted in India on the information needs of women, though this is a very vital aspect and a prerequisite for any developmental process. Women get information through various sources that are often not geared to their specific requirements.

- NGOs and the Govt. departments. generate information about women and prepare leaflets, indigenous newspapers, and small booklets etc.for distribution.
- The ICT based information systems give pertinent information concerning the rural sector activities but these are still general in nature. They however help women as well to a certain extent.
- Public libraries are a total failure at the rural sector because they are still traditional libraries dependent mainly on the print medium.
- Family members and friends are often the main source of information.
- The male members of the family who have better access to information source often share relevant information.

What is the way out?

Just as NGOs and the Government have come together to make poverty alleviation programmes successful through women centric initiatives in which poor women have been organized to circumvent the problems of liberal development processes, similarly women have to be made aware of their information needs as well. Once women make their decisions based on information relevant to them, their requirements will also be fulfilled as per their own terms. Presently someone else thinks for them and gauges their needs e.g. libraries and other information centres, media, educational/ Research institutions in the urban sector and the NGOs, government departments and recently the ICT managers in the rural sector prepare information capsules and disseminate for use.

There is a strong case for bringing together the expertise of library / information professionals, Government department officials who deal with women's problems, health workers, child care workers, NGOs and the ICT managers to envision communication centres in both urban and rural sectors to deal with the information requirements of urban and rural poor marginalized women, to give them the rightful opportunities for empowerment.

Relevant information have to be prepared in need based comprehensible formats in the regional languages to reach the unreached. ICT managers have to utilize audio and video, facilities to reach the illiterate women who are otherwise competent and worthy in their own fields of activities.

Libraries in the rural sector have to act as communication centres and shed the traditional bias towards the print medium. Mass media and interpersonal communication should be used extensively to improve information dissemination.

Conclusion

It is only through full understanding of the plight of women in the Globalization process can the government, NGOs, decision makers and information managers prepare proper strategies to empower women and bring them into the mainstream developmental process. This is the greatest challenge, which confronts India and its women because globalization will stay but with half the population suffering under its yoke will only make it draconian and not a facilitator of progress.

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