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Role of Right to Information Act in the Empowerment of Women

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Abstract

Right to Information is a basic human right of every human being. In the last few decades, there has been increasing awareness of the need to Empower Women in order to improve their socioeconomic status to be able to cope and also contribute effectively in the government functions. The implementation of RTI Act is one of the vital factors in the Empowerment of women. With the help of this act, women can also access information on different issues like domestic violence, harassment at workplaces, whether police is refusing to register an FIR in serious dowry related cases and deaths. In the concluding part, the paper provides some women RTI successive stories with great response. The rural women also need to play a crucial role in educating the advantages of utilizing the RTI. Though the act has certainly elevated the position of the women lot more can be done. This paper tries to highlight the importance of Right to Information in the empowerment of women.

Keywords: Accountability, Communication, Humanitarian, Corruption, Implementation etc.

Introduction

Right to Information Act, is a finest piece of legislation in Indian legal system which was enacted for bringing the transparency and accountability in the government. Right to information entitles the citizens of a country to have the right of access to official information held or in the custody of the government thus promoting transparency and accountability. The Act emanates from what the Indian Constitution guarantees itself. Under Article 19 (1) (a) the Constitution guarantees every citizen freedom of speech and expression with certain restrictions. Logically to allow the exercise of freedom of speech and expression effectively the country needs an informed civil society.

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Free flow of information is at the heart of democracy. It embodies power at one end and also responsibility at the other. Obviously the strength of a nation is measured by the amount of information it distributes or exchanges. As India grows socioeconomically and in demography transparent communication becomes mandatory. The Right to Information Act serves a natural consequence to our fundamental right of expression. The Act becomes more vital for the susceptible sections of our society as they fight social and economic norms which are derogatory on humanitarian grounds. This is particularly true for women issues.

Though we have crossed the first decade of the 21st century traditional patriarchal norms continue to demote women to secondary status within the household and workplace. Even now women are married young in most parts of India, quickly become mothers, and are then burdened by strict domestic and financial responsibilities. Consequently this extremely affects women's health, financial status, education, and political involvement. Additionally, only 54% of Indian women are literate as compared to 76% of men. Women receive little schooling and also suffer from unfair and biased inheritance and divorce laws. These laws prevent women from accumulating substantial financial assets, making it difficult for women to establish their own security and autonomy. But the Right to Information Act brings a relief in the women empowerment[1].

RTI Act and Empowerment of Women

The Right to Information Empowerment Programme aims at facilitating the effective engagement of civil society organizations in the field of the right to information, through awareness raising and capacity building activities Effective awareness of RTI Act, important laws, pro-people schemes would provide much needed tool to promote accountable and empower people at the grassroots.

The right to information act has a great role in the women's empowerment, because this Act has the potential in its own way in creating conditions for the woman to take recourse to a better well-informed decision-making process, even in her day-to-day life. Right to Information Act facilitates women self-dependency while continuing to project and safeguard her rights and privileges. Lack of access to information and technology affects people in general and in most cases women are most affected and the advancement of

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women has been affected by lack of access to vital information that relates to their rights, therefore the availability of an Act that guarantees free access to relevant and timely information is crucial for women's empowerment.[2]

Moreover, with this Act in place, women can also access information on issues like domestic violence, harassment at workplaces, whether police is refusing to register an FIR in serious dowry related cases and deaths.RTI not only strengthens women in difficult circumstances but also make things better for school and college girl dropouts, women with disabilities, women entrepreneurs, women SHG leaders, grassroots women leaders and women in general.

It is said that when one is fortified with knowledge in various aspects a lot of accidents can be prevented hence, information is a boon to women's empowerment and Gender Equality. Lack of information leads to hindrance to lot of things such access to health, education, social and economic reforms etc.

The utilization of Right to Information Act certainly accelerates the empowerment process of women and since world now recognizes the fact that women are the accepted agents of development and the crucial role that women play in development process. Acknowledging the huge potential especially in the group dynamics of women Self Help Groups it becomes essential that these SHG make efforts to build intra and inter social group alliances so as to build them as a difficult force and increase their bargaining power to push government to implement the rights that are available to women in definitive term in the forms of legal entitlements, case law judgments, government schemes and programmes and budgetary allocations. Beyond being a fundamental right in itself, Right to Information also crucially facilitates the exercise of other rights.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of awareness about the essential link between Right to Information and women's well – being that there is a limited participation of women in regards to it. Therefore, in this regard women's organization need to create, develop and invest is sustained training education and capacity building on Right to Information Act as a crucial element for all organizations working with woman's right, special emphasis need to brought to bear on the linkages between women's rights, social justice, public participation, reform and the capacity of women to engage with these issues

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through information. The linkage between the participation and realization of almost all other rights cannot happen or envisaged without information itself.

Right to Information among women

Women in rural areas are among the underprivileged sections of the society, who due to various socio- economic conditions, are not able to use their rights in a frequent basis. Though there are some case studies, which depict that women in small percentages exercise RTI to seek information, but that does not prove that women are filing RTI applications as their democratic right. Few cases are mentioned below, which shows that women are using their rights:

- Mrs Khetramani Samantrai of Bhubensewar used RTI to get information about her land document. Mrs Samantrai, brought a land near Dhauli, Bhubaneshwar. Karunakar Swain, a nortary club prepared the land document, which was submitted at the District Sub-Register Office (DSO) in Bhubensewar, but she did not receive the original document. She filed along with some voluntary association filed RTI, to know the cause of the delay in providing the original document.[3]

- M. Lakshmi Devi, a 25-year- old Dalit women from Kondavanipalli village of Kurnool district in Andhra Pradesh used to work as daily wage labourer weeding ploughing or sowing seeds in fields or digging and constructing roads and earned Rupees 40. In 2002, due to her father's sickness she took a loan of mere Rupees 1000 hoping to repay it. What she did not know was that the upper caste moneylender had made her sign five acres of land away with a thumb impression. She joined APDS-Andhra Pradesh Dalit Samakhya (women Self Help Group) to rescue her land. By the using the Right to Information Act, Lakshmi and her fellow activists found 110 acres of vacant land, and lobbied hard for it to be given to Dalit women. In November last year, sixty women got one or two acres of fertile land worth Rupees 1, 00,000/ acre. "This is a small but we say that it is a significant example!" it is important women organizations come together and map out a strategy on how they can push for the Right to Information process.

- Mrs Vinita Kamte, the wife of late IPS Officer Ashok Kamte, who died fighting terrorists during the 26/11 Mumbai attack, in her Book 'To The Last Bullet', brought to light the various lapses

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on part of the Indian security system that lead to the killing of many including Ashok Kamte. The expose' was based on the information gathered with the provision of the Right to Information Act in place. In an interview to a news portal, Vinita Kamte clearly stated that the post mortem report of the deceased police officer was also obtained through a request made under the Right to Information Act.

- Mrs Suvarana Bhagyawant made rounds for two years to the panchayat office to get her grandfather's death certificate. Every time, the official there would tell her to come later or pay a bribe of Rupees 500 to get the work done. Suvarana, a resident of the Ambhegaon village, needed the certificate so that her grandmother could apply for the widow pension scheme. Finally, Suvarana filed a query under the Right to Information (RTI) Act. She got the certificate within eight days. "This piece of paper is like a weapon for the powerless to fight against corrupt establishment," says Suvarana, pointing to an RTI application. For the villagers of Ambhegaon, the RTI Act has come as long-awaited rain in a drought-prone area. Today, we tell the officials that if they do not look at our problems, we will file an RTI query," says Archana Bhagyawant. She was forced to file an RTI query after the officer demanded a bribe of Rupees 150 for the issuance of a new ration card. "I waited for a year and finally when I filed an RTI query, I got it within three weeks. The Sarpanch personally delivered it at my home," Suvarana and Archana are part of a unique initiative begun by the Public Concern for Governance Trust (PCGT)-in partnership with the Bahujan Hitay Trust-that aims to improve the quality of lives in villages in Kalyan by using RTI.[4]

Why is RTI important for women?

Women are the least likely to demand and receive access to information, yet are perhaps the most in need of this powerful tool. Women often face the double burden of income generation and caring for their families. Increasingly they are the key decision makers as the number of female-headed households has risen due to civil conflicts and men finding work far from home. Women represent an estimated 70 percent of the world's impoverished and two thirds of the world's illiterate as economic and educational opportunities for women remain limited.[5] further, women are more susceptible to and affected by corruption. With genuine access to information, women can take

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advantage of opportunities to transform their lives, families, and communities. In particular, access to information:

- Allows women to make more effective decisions, for example with relation to education, crop production, land ownership, and health care
- Enables women to know and exercise their full range of rights
- Helps women to participate more fully in public life
- Is critical for holding government and service providers accountable and reducing corruption
- Bridges gender gaps and helps to shift power
- Is economically empowering for women

Women in rural India remain aloof to RTI

The use of Right to Information Act surely accelerates the empowerment process of women. Yet the main failure of the Act has been that it has not been invoked. the very concept of RTI is not known to women of rural areas. Due to the lack of awareness, very few cases have come up where women stand up against injustice through the RTI Act. Even in the urban region people are not aware properly about the different circumstances under which the right to Information Act is applicable. Due to illiteracy & also lack of proper knowledge most of the time women are not aware of their rights. For this actually the participation from women activist group or self-help group is needed. The Act is there, provisions are there to implement it but participation is missing as they don't know how to participate[6].

Some problems that continue to plague proper implementation of RTI are:-

- Poor quality of information provided and more than 75% of the citizens are dissatisfied with the quality of information being provided.
- Women in rural areas do not participate in political affairs, thus, they do not take initiative to exercise RTI and make the governing institutions more representative and accountable.
- The delay in issuing a decision after filling an RTI Act also becomes a constraint among women in filling RTI. These are just a few of the constraints that have hampered the success of the act in the rural areas.

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- RTI is a tool to bring transparency and accountability among governmental institutions. In particular, the RTI Act has a much higher impact on the quality of life of the poor and the marginalised sections of the society. RTI, if properly implemented, can be a boon to rural women. Thus, effort should be made to make the rural women aware of the act and its implementation. There should be RTI campaigns in villages to make them aware of it.
- We can conclude that through the RTI Act, the rural women can politically and socially be aware of their environment, but efforts should be made to make the act easily available to them. According to Aruna Roy, a protagonist of the Right to Information Act, "The RTI Act gave the common man a vital tool to demand their rights without getting beaten up on the streets." [7]

Conclusion

During last some years of enactment of RTI Act there are many success stories wherein women have been benefitted through this legislation. Today ordinary women can question the Government authorities which weren't possible earlier. Government has indeed failed to some extent to create awareness about this act in different rural areas, but we must be optimistic and should not only blame the Government. The rural women also need to play a crucial role in educating the advantages of utilizing the RTI. Though the act has certainly elevated the position of the women lot more can be done.

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