



Women Empowerment for Social Change in Haryana, A Comment

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Abstract:

Haryana State is largely agriculture based state; most of its population live in villages. The rural Haryana combined with strong patriarchal leanings make the status of women in rural Haryana precarious. Rural women in Haryana, as in other parts of India, suffer from variety of disadvantages. Foremost among them is lack of education among women. Another is its skewed sex ratio. The number of women per one thousand men in Haryana is among the lowest in India.

Hence we need to empower women in rural Haryana. This can be done in a variety of ways, like, through spread of education and awareness about rights, changing the patriarchal mindset/system.

Concerted efforts are being made in that direction by the government and other agencies to uplift and educate the rural women. Similarly, the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act created the institutions of village panchayats and local bodies, and gave one-third reservation to women.

How far the institution of panchayats in Haryana has changed their status or empowered them, is a matter of debate. Similarly, the issue of spreading education for women in villages is also debatable. Along with this the patriarchal system, and deep prejudices against women in the rural set-up, recently reflected in the form of assertive Khap panchayats, also need to be examined and analysed. The scope of the instant paper is to critically analyse all these and related issues.

Key Words

Haryana, rural women, patriarchal, sex ratio, literacy rate, khaps, panchayats.

Introduction

It has been rightly observed that gender equality is a human right. A woman is entitled to live in dignity and freedom. Empowering women is a crucial means for advancing growth and reducing poverty. To protect human rights of women and ensure gender equality has been a constant endeavour of the independent India. The Constitution of India protects the rights and privileges of women by providing Fundamental Rights under Articles 14, 15 & 16, to name a few. Article 14 provides for equality before law and equal protection of

laws to all including women. Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the ground of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Article 16 provides equality of opportunity to all citizen including women in matters of public employment. By way of 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution, the Parliament has provided for creation of Panchayats and Municipalities in the country. It has also been provided that one-third of the seats in the Panchayats and Municipalities shall be reserved for women. Apart from the Constitutional provisions, the States have from time to time enacted different Acts to protect the rights of women. To name a few, the Indian Succession Act, 1925, which gives women equal rights of inheritance in the ancestral property. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929, the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, the Hindu Minority and Guardian Act, 1956, the National Commission for Women Act, 1990, the Pre- Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994 and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. All these legislative provisions have been enacted with a view to ensuring equality before law and equal protection of law to women. It is an important step in prohibiting and eradicating discrimination against women. It is only by providing statutory protection and rights to women, that their participation in the political economic and social activity can be ensured. This is one of the most important tools to empower women. Empowerment of women can only be ensured when they gain a status equal to men, and are able to share their rights and obligations in all spheres of life.

All these Acts have been implemented in the State of Haryana as well. Haryana is a young state of the Union of India; it was carved out of the Punjab State in 1966. Haryana is largely agriculture based state; most of its population lives in villages. Although urbanisation has taken place in forty seven years of its existence and the existing towns have grown into cities, but Haryana essentially remains a rural society. According to 2011 census, 65.12 per cent of its population lives in villages. Most Haryanvis, therefore, live in villages or small rural towns, which have trappings of villages only. Another peculiarity of Haryana, related to it's being a rural society, is the strong patriarchal leanings present among people here.

The rural Haryana combined with strong patriarchal leanings make the status of women in rural Haryana precarious. Rural women in Haryana, as in other parts of India, suffer from a variety of disadvantages. Foremost among them is the lack of education. Illiteracy has its own pitfalls, like subjugation, lack of awareness about one's rights, economic dependence, mal-nutrition, etc.

The secondary data were collected from various sources such as Government reports, newspaper, books, National and International Journals and various websites on the various aspects of women entrepreneurship.

A comparison of the 2001 and 2011 Census figures for the state of Haryana brings out the following data throwing light on the indices of women empowerment in the state.

Description	2011	2001
Approximate Population	2.54 crores	2.11 crores
Actual Population	25,351,462	21,144,564
Male	13,494,734	11,363,953
Female	11,856,728	9,780,611
Population Growth	19.90%	28.06%
Percentage of total population	2.09%	2.06%
Sex Ratio	879	861
Child Sex Ratio	834	964
Male Population (0-6 Age)	1,843,109	1,833,655
Female Population (0-6 Age)	1,537,612	1,501,882
Literacy	75.55%	67.91%
Male Literacy	84.06%	76.10%
Female Literacy	56.91%	59.61%
Total Literacy	16,598,988	12,093,677
Male Literate	9,794,067	7,480,209
Female Literate	6,804,921	4,613,468

The 2011 Census figures of Rural and Urban Haryana with regard to Sex Ratio, Male and Female Literacy, etc. are as follows:

Description	Rural	Urban
Population (%)	65.12%	34.88%
Population Growth	9.85%	44.59%
Sex Ratio	882	873
Average Literacy	71.42%	83.14%
Male Literacy	81.55%	88.63%
Female Literacy	51.96%	65.98%

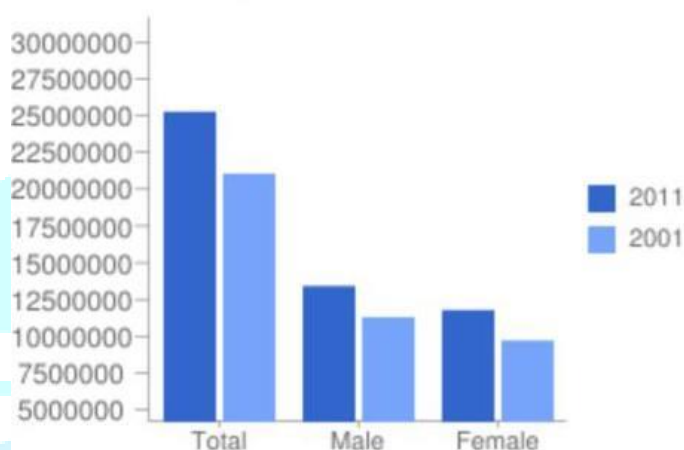
✓ Rural/Urban Divide

Rural Urban Haryana



✓ Population Chart

Population of Haryana



Source: 2011 Census, Govt. of Haryana

Literacy refers to the capability of a person to read and write with understanding in at least one language. A person who can read and write with understanding in any language is considered as literate. All children below the age of 6 years have been treated as illiterate (Census of India).

As per 2011 census the population of Haryana stands at about 2.5 crores. The literacy rate in the state is about 76 per cent; male literacy stands at 84.06 per cent while female literacy is at 56.91 per cent. As per 2001 census figures, literacy rate in Haryana was 67.91 per cent of which male and female literacy percentage was 76.10 per cent, and 59.61 per cent, respectively. This shows from 2001 to 2011 the female literacy in Haryana has, in fact, decreased from 59.61 per cent to 56.91 per cent, while there has been an increase in the male literacy during this period. This is despite all the efforts at women literacy having been made by the government at huge expense to the exchequer.

Another interesting aspect concerning the State of Haryana that comes to light by the 2011 census is, in rural Haryana the literacy rate for males is 81.55 per cent; and in urban Haryana it is 88.63 per cent. Female literacy in rural Haryana is 51.96 per cent and in urban Haryana it is 65.98 per cent. The figures show better male literacy as compared to women, both in rural as well as urban Haryana; and also that the gap between male and female literacy among urban and rural women (14.02%) is far more as compared to the one between urban and rural males (7.08%). The women in urban Haryana are better placed than their counterparts in rural Haryana. Literacy levels among urban women have increased as is the case with men, but amongst rural women the levels of literacy have gone down considerably over the last ten years. These figures, therefore,

reassert a well known fact that literacy levels among urban women are better than rural women in Haryana. It is especially the women in rural Haryana that need to be taken care of, and deserve more attention.

Another disturbing fact thrown by the 2011 census data for Haryana is that its sex ratio is 879 females for each 1000 males, which is far below the national average of 940 for each 1000 males. There has been a slight improvement in the sex ratio, as in 2001, the ratio was 861 per 1000 males in Haryana. The poor sex-ratio in Haryana is also an indicator of the pathetic state of women. The sex-ratio in the state, which is much below the national average by 70 points, leaves much to be desired. The highest sex ratio in the State is found in the most backward district of the State, i.e., Mewat, where it is 907 females per 1000 males. Similarly, in the district of Fatehabad, which is almost entirely a rural district, the sex ratio is 902, in district Rewari it is 898, in Mahendergarh it is 895 and in Sirsa it is 897. In more developed and industrialised districts in the state of Haryana, like Gurgaon, Panchkula and Faridabad, the sex ratio is poor as compared to the backward and agricultural based districts of Mewat and Fatehabad.

The 2011 census data also shows that the most backward district of Mewat, both in terms of education and economic development, has the best sex-ratio in the State. This may point out to an inference that the levels of literacy and sex-ratio are not inversely related. Therefore, we cannot be sure of improved sex-ratio in an educated society. Can it be said that education fails to have a saner effect on the people so far as improving the sex-ratio is concerned? To some extent it seems right, because the effort at gender sensitisation has to be rooted in changing patriarchal behaviours also which are not achieved through education only. It takes time for the society to shed its inhibitions and prejudices about women. Once the rural women start exercising their rights, and achieve a level of economic, social and political freedom, and in the process bring about theirs and the society's development, that the society would be forced to change their attitudes towards the girl child and women, and shed their chauvinistic attitudes. But we cannot just afford to wait the change to happen on its own, concerted efforts have to be made in that direction. Women have to be provided with all the protection they need to assert and enjoy their rights, education being one of them, gender sensitisation, the other. People should be trained and taught to accept women as their equal partners in all spheres of life, be it societal, financial, political, and trade or business.

Despite awareness campaigns by the government and enactment of the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, 1994 (PNDT Act), the number of women per one thousand men in Haryana is among the lowest in India. This increasing gap in male-female ratio has serious repercussions for the state and its ill effects have already become visible in the form of difficulties faced by rural males in finding matrimonial alliances and the increasing violence against women. Although violence against women in Haryana is not a new phenomenon, it is increasing by the day. Women illiteracy, lack of economic independence, and ignorance about rights is only adding to male hegemony and violence against women in rural Haryana.

On analysing the afore stated figures thrown by the 2011 census, it becomes apparent that much needs to be done for empowering women in rural Haryana, if the levels of literacy and sex-ratio are taken as indicators of women empowerment. In the levels of literacy, the rural Haryana lags far behind as compared to, not only the urban Haryana but also the all India average/percentage. This also explains the poor conditions

of women in rural Haryana, who have been the worst sufferers of male hegemony. They have not tasted social, economic and political independence so far. Socially the women in rural Haryana are largely confined to doing household jobs. Even the jobs meant for men, like working in fields and bringing fodder for the cattle, etc., is done by women. Property rights have never been theirs. Although of late, by way of amendment in 2006, the Hindu Succession Act has provided for equal share to women in the inherited property, the same is generally not given to them in the name of preserving the family property for the male progeny. In this social and economic situation, the women in rural Haryana could never even imagine to exercise political rights. It was only after enactment of the Constitution 73rd Amendment, providing for 1/3rd seats for women, that the rural women have been assigned political positions in the form of membership/president-ship of the Panchayat bodies. If we go deeper into the role played by rural women as political activists, we come to know that these women representatives of Panchayats are, as a matter of routine, put up as candidates only because their men folks could not contest against the seats reserved for women in the Panchayats. Although, on paper the rural women have representation in these bodies, the actual power on their behalf is almost always exercised by their husbands, confining the women/elected panches (members) to their homes only. This has largely been the situation prevalent in rural Haryana.

The following data shows the position of the elected women representatives of the Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samities and Zila Parishad in Haryana as per Report on General Elections to the Panchayati Raj Institutions in Haryana held in July, 2016.

Office	Total seats	General		Scheduled Caste		Backward Class
		Men	Women	Men	Women	
GRAM PANCHAYAT						
Sarpanch	6193	3273	1642	823	455	No reservation
Panches	62466	26312	16082	7273	6854	5945
PANCHAYAT SAMITI						
Members of PS	3002	1432	755	415	274	126
ZILA PARISHAD						
President						
Members of ZP	416	195	108	56	36	21

	Total	SC	Woman	BC
Sarpanch	6186	1436	2565	-
Panches	60438	15468	25495	14116
Zila Parishad	416	96	181	54
Panchayat Samitis	2997	784	1252	499

Although the aforesaid data shows impressive figures of women representation in the Panchayat bodies, the reality is otherwise as an overwhelming majority of these women are unable to perform their duties and exercise powers due to a variety of reasons like the male dominance, lack of awareness about their rights and duties, complete financial dependence on their male partners, official apathy, etc. The field studies on Haryana Panchayati Raj Institutions have also reported that it would be more appropriate to say that the empowerment of women after the 73rd Constitution Amendment actually means “empowering men through women”, see *Local Democracy and Good Governance*, New Delhi, by Ranbir Singh and Surat Singh (Eds.). Another study of Haryana by Rekha Chaudhary, “Empowerment of Women in PRIs of Haryana” also reports that most women have not been empowered as yet due to lack of education, awareness and confidence in them. Studies also show, although participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions has increased, their role in decision making has still to go a long way. As observed by Prof. Ranbir Singh in his article “Empowerment of Women in PRIs: Issue and Challenges”, “a sizeable proportion of women representatives in panchayats has been able to get status but not power. One third reservation for women in panchayats is not going to empower them until the attitude of their male counterparts and the official functionaries becomes positive. Only those women representatives have been genuinely empowered who were educated, articulate, and psychologically strong and were not only having an un-stinted support from their families but also having linkages with political leaders. The women with experience in social work and politics, too, have been empowered.”

We need to give more stress on educating women in rural Haryana, as the figures show literacy among rural women is in fact on the decline, which is very disturbing. Unless the women are educated, they would not be able to enjoy the rights given to them under various laws enacted by the State for their benefit and upliftment. Uneducated women would always be required to play a second fiddle to their husbands. An illiterate woman would not only remain ignorant of her rights, she would not be able to enjoy either the economic freedom or the property rights.

To cite a recent incident, in July 2013 five educated women were, for the first time, elected Mayors of newly constituted Municipal Corporations in Haryana. They came to meet the Chief Minister of the state at Chandigarh. Regarding the meeting “The Tribune” news paper, vol. 133, no. 186, dated 07 July 2013, reported in its columns, “The men, husbands, sons and their friends, hovered around the women and were there to answer every little query when they could. Interestingly, all attempts to get the numbers of the women Mayors earlier in the day ended up in calls to their husbands who chose to answer all questions rather than letting their wives do the talking.” If this is the state of affairs concerning the educated women Mayors, who represent elected bodies/corporations in five big cities in the state, one can well imagine the plight of the more vulnerable and less educated rural women in village Panchayats.

Another factor hindering empowerment of the Panchayats, and through them empowerment of the rural women, is the politico-bureaucratic nexus that is not willing to let these Panchayats function as institutions self-governance. The bureaucracy at every level, with tacit support of the political bosses, has tried to subvert the very idea of self governance for fear of losing power. The District Collectors and the lower levels of district officers have scant regard for the elected representatives/panchayat members. An elected

Sarpanch can be straight away suspended by the Collector even on account of minor irregularities. This is often done at whims, or to please the political bosses. Never in a democracy can an elected representative be restrained from performing his/her duties under executive orders. Financial independence to the Panchayats will remain a pipe dream so long as the bureaucracy calls the shots. The officers' behaviour becomes more brazen when the elected representatives of Panchayats happen to be women. This again allows the husbands to take over their (women's) roles in the Panchayats and call the shots.

Some of the well documented and tested methods of removing discrimination and improving the status of women are, skill development, credit facilities, career and business guidance, and transfer of technology to them both in farm and non-farm activities. Transfer of technology can do wonders for women in rural Haryana as well. Apart from that social awareness through street plays in villages and registration of every child and effective enforcement of the PNMT Act are some of the measures that will help improve sex ratio in the state.

Apart from the aforesaid measures, the state machinery and the people in general need to raise their voice against the regressive caste panchayats or Khap panchayats, which have of late started asserting themselves on social issues with renewed force. These Khap panchayats basically represent the patriarchs of the dominant landed castes, with hardly any representation of the women or other marginalised classes or castes. The Khap leaders are not elected by any method known to law, nor do they have any known principles or policies to govern themselves as representative bodies. The only things these bodies are known for, in the recent times, is propagating male hegemony and subjugation of women in the name of honour and same gotra (sub-caste) marriages, though considered legal under the prevalent laws. These caste panchayats in rural Haryana are a sign of social and cultural backwardness to some extent, and need to be prevented from raising its head time and again for wrong reasons. One of the reasons giving rise to activities of these bodies is the lack of political will to restrain them. Politicians, both in power and out of power, have not shown courage to denounce even unlawful acts of these bodies for fear of annoying the dominant castes. Instead, both have directly or indirectly supported the Khap panchayats. This attitude of the political class lays bare its lack of commitment to improving the social fabric of the society in Haryana and strengthening the position of women.

At administrative level, efforts are being made by the State government and other agencies by running various programmes to uplift the rural women, by opening more schools and recruiting teachers to make education accessible to women in rural Haryana. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2019 (RTE Act) is another step in that direction to make education accessible to all the children by making education a Fundamental Right for every child. These are indeed bold steps to empower rural women. Given the background in rural Haryana, where patriarchal and caste prejudices against women reign supreme, and they are poorly educated, financially and socially dependent on males, and lack property rights, the empowerment of women has a long way to go.

Conclusion:

The analysis, in fact, points out that the situation for women in rural Haryana is far from satisfactory. The measures like Panchayati Raj system and the RTE Act were no doubt well intended, but their implementation is poor. The empowerment of women through the Panchayati Raj system has almost been frustrated by the bureaucratic trappings and executive unwillingness to loosen the purse strings allowing

devolution of power to these institutions and its women representatives in particular. School education is in shambles. The condition of rural schools and the quality of teachers recruited is again not satisfactory. This is explained by the mushrooming private schools even in rural Haryana. Due to all these and related factors, the patriarchal system remains intact with all its trappings, leaving the women helpless, harassed and frustrated, and sex ratio skewed. The efforts at empowerment of rural women so far have not brought the desired results, and much needs to be done to empower women in rural Haryana, like, the spread of education and awareness about rights, changing the patriarchal mindset/systems by trying to make the males more accommodating and sensitive to women's needs and aspirations, etc. And last of all, effective implementation of the laws enacted to empower and protect women against exploitation of all kinds.

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