
Sakthi: An Iconic Representation of Woman Empowerment

Dr. P.S. Sreevidya

Abstract: *The issue of woman empowerment has gained considerable attention in recent times because the status of woman in Indian society has consequently changed from time to time. The problem of subordination and marginalization of woman points out to the re-empowerment of the woman or the awakening of the sacred womanhood. Empowering woman means to create an environment where woman can freely exercise their rights both within and outside home and equal partners along with men. The traditional Indian concept of sakthi is relevant here as it is the high time for re-consideration of spiritual empowerment of woman. The iconic representation of sakthi and its worship is nothing other than the traditional concept of woman empowerment. The keen observation of the present position of Indian woman in the light of sakthi is a negative indicator. The historical transformation of woman's position in the society reveals the fact that the empowerment of the women is not possible only through the education but also by enlightening them through the philosophy of Indian spiritualism, Spiritual empowerment, the key to freedom and raising the status of women in the society is the essence of Indian traditional concept of sakthi or woman empowerment.*

Keywords: *sakthi, woman, empowerment, sacred, worship.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Now everywhere in India is the demand of woman empowerment and then the question arises why there is the demand of woman empowerment. As the position of woman in a society is an index of the standard of its social organization, throughout the history of the Indian civilization it is clearly visualized that woman enjoyed a very considerable position in society and their status was much better than at present. As several civilizations evolved, their status was gradually deteriorating and there has been a steady decline in the proportion of the female sex all over the world. Though the number of working woman is increasing; there are certain fields in which the entry of woman is still barred. The span of longevity, the rate of mortality and the range of immunization among the females are still the negative indicators. Health care, education, literacy, income ratio, and social status are the different parameters by which the position of women is gauged to be lower than that of men. In every walk of life, woman were and are still marginalized and of lower than status than men because woman always have been subjugated to subordinate status by men. The problems of subordination and marginalization of woman point out to the re-empowerment of the woman or the awakening of the sacred womanhood. The traditional Indian concept of *shakti* is relevant here as it is the high time for re-consideration of spiritual empowerment of women. . In ancient Indian culture, the only word for strength and power are feminine- *sakthi* means power and strength. *Sakthi* is dynamic energy that is responsible for creation, maintenance, and destruction of the universe. It is conceived as female energy because *sakthi* is responsible for creation, as mothers are responsible for birth. Without *sakthi*, nothing in this world would happen.

2. POSITION OF WOMAN IN INDIA

Before considering the position of woman in contemporary Indian society, it is necessary to understand the meaning of women empowerment. Empowerment is a process of social, psychological and spiritual development of any vulnerable section of the society where economic and political measures must act as supporting services. So woman empowerment is a process may involve several gender issues but as a movement it must strive for gender co-operation and gender co-existence. Empowering woman means to create an environment where woman can freely exercise their rights both within and outside home and equal partners along with men. Woman plays a crucial role in the development of family, group and ultimately the nation. The issue of woman empowerment is complex because the status of woman in Indian society has consequently always changed from time to time. The status of women in ancient India occupied a very important position, in fact a superior position to men based on liberty, equality, and cooperation, but in the medieval India, the position of women was very much lowered and in modern India the status of women is almost the same as it was in the medieval period.

Today in Indian society women have been suffering gender bias and inequality. India is facing the terrible menace of female feticide and female infanticide because of traditional preference for a male child. As per the latest estimate, infant mortality rate in India is 40.5/1000 live births. While the rate for male child is 39.2 deaths/1000 live births; for females it is 41.8 deaths/1000 live births. Indian society has to change the attitude towards female feticide. Mother-in-laws, wives and mothers also participate in female feticide; so do some female doctors, radiologists and nurses. Female feticide is a problem of the entire society. Gender ratio is an important statistic revealing decline in female population compared to that of men in India. This decline in post-independence era is due to availability of advanced medical technology for parental sex selection and female feticide. Main reason for decline in gender ratio is selective neglect of the girl child and positive performance for the male child as the reasons behind declining gender ratio. In the 2011 census, the gender ratio in India was 940 females per 1000 of males. Per census 2001 there were only 933 females per 1000 males. For the last two of the decades there has been a slight increase in the gender ratio due to sustained campaigns by the government in banning parental sex determination. Despite this, there are some states where the gender ratio is still low. The main cause of gender bias is lack of awareness and inadequate education. The declining gender ratio, if not corrected and normalized soon can eventually create tremendous sociological and law and order problems for the nation. There are some important lessons to be learning from save the girl child campaigns and these campaigns have to be re-invigorated at all levels and applied irrespective of religion.

One of the major challenge before empowerment of the woman is the lower literacy rate of India. Though the government has made a law that every child under the age of 14 to get free education, the problem of literacy still at large. In 1947, literacy rate was only 12% but in the 2011 census; literacy rate in India was 74%. The female, literacy level as per 2011 census is 65.46% were the male literacy rate is over 80%. While the adult literacy rates are lower and cannot be increased, focus has to be on improving the literacy rates for younger population. The numbers of children who do not get education in the rural areas are still very high. Female literacy rate is still lower than male literacy rate because people in rural areas do not value education for girls.

3. WHY SAKTHI IS RELEVANT ?

Today our civilization does not truly recognize the divinity inherent in the universe. We feverishly pursue human and worldly deities instead, that bring more turmoil into our troubled existence. We have lost touch with the ancient reverential practice of honoring the Gods and Goddesses. Our current culture is outwardly oriented, subjugated by lower masculine values of achievement, acquisition and even hostility. We are caught up in trying to manipulate and exploit the outer world to fulfill our urges and impulses that are often excessive and distorted the feminine values of fostering, surrender and respect for all creatures are being ignored by society, even by women. Women are usually looked upon as mere objects of attraction and pleasure in today's media world. Meanwhile, intellectuals and academics make sweeping statements denigrating sacred ancient traditions that worship nature and the Goddess, as if these were but superstition and oppression. Considering all these circumstances, the reinforcement of *sakthi* worship is necessary.

The Sanskrit word *sakthi* can be translated as power or energy which is derived from the verb root *sak*, which means to be able, to do, to act. This power is witnessed in all the various phenomena of life. It is force responsible for the growth of vegetation, animals and human beings. It is what is responsible for the movement of all things. *Sakthi* is manifest as the very affective ability of all the forces of nature. It is the power of *dharma* to uphold, support and develop, which brings about cohesion and consolidation. *Sakthi* is unfortunately misunderstood as promoting the separate self, encouraging personal self etc. This is contrary to its true meaning of developing community and relationship, extending to the entire universe as a single family. It is not a mere self assertion, control or power over others. Nor is it mere economic or political dominance. *Sakthi* refers not to the power of aggression that divides and causes conflict, but to the power of integration that unites and brings peace. *Sakthi* is the force of wisdom and enlightenment, not ignorance and inertia, a creative not a destructive energy. It gives refinement and sensitivity, not crudeness and intolerance. *Sakthi* is the inspiration and joy arising from the inner steadiness, contentment and openness to flow of divine grace. Women especially need to cultivate *sakthi* or the energy to enhance the nurturing and calming nature of the home and the hearth, which sustain the family, community and society. The feminine principle must be revered and protected to allow universal healing at a deeper emotional level. Today India needs

to promote a new *sakthi* among its women, starting with young girls, empowering, educating and respecting them. The *sakthi* paradigm is so integral to ancient Indian tradition that we have enough individual role models for young girls already. What we really need to do is devise multi-dimensional strategies and action plans to re-internalize the *sakthi* symbolism in day to day life in order to reestablish the respect and the primacy of women in the contemporary Indian society. The focus has to be nurturing the girl child instead of fighting for a right -based approach that turns women into man.

Sakthi is the presupposition of all forms of existential power, the power of knowledge, of omniscience. It is symbolically female; but it is, in reality, neither male nor female. It is only a force which manifests itself in various forms. *sakthi* cannot be worshiped in its essential nature, it is worshiped in its manifestations. *Sakthism* is the worship of the Supreme Being as the divine mother in the form of *sakthi* or Devi; she stimulates the passive energy in the form of consciousness, to create. For example, *Ardhanarishvara*, a Hindu deity who is half male and half female, is an iconic representation of this idea. The deity is equally male and female, illustrating that the creation, maintenance, and destruction of the universe is dependent on both forces. The worship of *sakthi* venerates the power of not only the Goddess but also every woman on the earth. So the essence of *sakthi* worship includes the awakening of:-

- ✓ Consciousness or hidden power
- ✓ Self awareness
- ✓ Self esteem, self confidence
- ✓ Self value, self empowerment
- ✓ Freedom to think
- ✓ Eternal happiness and peace
- ✓ Spiritual empowerment

India has always honored the spiritual role of woman and the feminine principle and this can observe from the widespread worship of the Goddesses in numerous forms starting with Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswathy, Parvathy and Kali. It is unfortunate that *sakthi* is interpreted as a property of Hinduism alone. But in fact it does not belong to any particular religion. It is the conscious power of the God with different names and forms for concessions given to the limitations of human knowledge; human comprehension. Truly speaking, all beings of the universe are *sakthi* worshippers, for there is none who does not love and long for power in some form or other. Thus empowerment of this *sakthi* in every woman is the need of the hour. In short, the iconic representation of *sakthi* and re-internalization of the image of *sakthi* in her various forms is an excellent role model for woman worldwide.

4. CONCLUSION

Woman empowerment is a hot topic of discussion today and it is need to think why people think about woman empowerment or woman empowerment become an issue. After analyzing the position of woman in society, it can be come to the conclusion that woman empowerment is multidimensional and the traditional Indian concept of *sakthi* is more relevant in the context of woman empowerment. The iconic representation of *sakthi* and its worship in various forms are nothing other than the traditional concept of women empowerment. The keen observation of the present position of Indian woman on the light of *sakthi* is a negative indicator. In India there were distinct stages of rise and fall in the position of women. During ancient period, the women were given an equal status along with men in almost every field of life. In early Vedic period, the women received higher education and participated in the discussion of political and philosophical nature with male scholars. The position of women gradually declined in post-Vedic period as well as in medieval India. The position of women further declined during the British rule in India. Today the position of women in India is facing much cruelty and exploitation due to prevalence of several social factors such as literacy, dowry, female feticide, rape, widowhood, sexual harassment, child marriage, domestic violence, etc. The historical transformation of woman's position in the society reveals the fact that the empowerment of the women is not possible only through the education but also by enlightening them through the philosophy of Indian spiritualism, which might be considered as an effective system or approach in the process of

empowering women. As woman empowerment a multi-dimensional concept represent a wide range of concepts, the traditional respect and honor for women in Hindu society and use of *sakthi* symbolism will go a long way in re-empowering women and consolidating their equal role in the modern Indian society. We must not shy away from invoking the ancient Hindu concepts of the supreme energy force or *sakthi* in woman's empowerment. Spiritual empowerment, the key to freedom and raising the status of women in the society is the essence of Indian traditional concept of *sakthi* or woman empowerment.

REFERENCES

- [1] Devendro, Kivan,(1985). Status and Position of Women in India. Bombay: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd
- [2] Golberg, Ellen,(2002). The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanarisvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective. New York: Albany State University of New York Press.
- [3] Shaktism, Encyclopaedis Britannica. (2015).
- [4] Hall, C.M, (1992). Women and Empowerment. London: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation.
- [5] India Human Development Report 2011, Institute of Applied Manpower Research, Planning Commission, Government of India.
- [6] Kumar, Pushpendra,(1986). The principle of sakthi. New Delhi: Eastern Book Linker.
- [7] Neela B Saxena, (2012).Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Sheila Briggs, eds. The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Teology.Oxford University Press.
- [8] Sushama Sahay,(1998). Women and Empowerment Approaches and Strategies. Darya Ganj: Discovery Publishing Pvt. Ltd.
- [9] Upadhyaya, N,(1990). Woman in India, Past and Present. Allahabad: Chad Publications.