



Women empowerment discourses and theocratic tendencies of Indian democracy in 21st Century.

Dr. Mathachan K J

Assistant professor of German

Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya

Abstract:

Women empowerment discourses have been at the core of secular democratic processes around the world. Degree of the empowerment enjoyed by women differs in relation to level of socio-economic conditions of individual woman and that of socio-economic and cultural conditions of the country one lives. Degree of empowerment enjoyed by the women in a country is directly proportional to whether it is a democracy and more over a secular democracy. Economic development of a country alone does not guarantee the empowerment of its women. A theocratic government can cause economical development at the same time tends to demand the women to oblige in accordance with the social norms expected by the majoritarian religious-cultural ethos. Women empowerment chances are at the minimum in a theocratic and autocratic states and it is maximum in a secular democracy. Therefore it is necessary for a state to be secular democracy to guarantee the empowerment process of its women. The paper tries to understand the level of women empowerment process and theocratic tendencies of 21st century India.

Keywords:

Women empowerment, Democracy, Theocracy, Secularism.

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Introduction

Major definitions of women empowerment consist of the promotion of sense of self worth felt by women, their ability to determine their own choices, and their right to influence social change for themselves and others. The word 'empowerment' etymologically denotes 'to give power or authority to'. Women empowerment in that sense means to give power or authority to women. Then how much power? 'As equal to men.' That indicates gender equality. Therefore gender inequality is at the root of women disempowerment. Any institution, customs, values, practices whether religious, social, political or economical which promotes gender inequality can be considered or in fact are anti- women empowerment and generally in those sense anti-women. Women constitutes 50% of any nation, therefore whatever is anti-women is also anti-National, "Gender-based inequality is a phenomenon that transcends the majority of the world's cultures, religions, nations and income groups. In most societies, the differences and inequalities between women and men are manifest in the responsibilities each are assigned, in the activities they undertake, in their access to and control over resources and in decision-making opportunities" (Global Gender Gap Report, 2006, p.3). At common parlance though it might appear as low social status or acceptance that women face at the socio-cultural realm but at the core of gender equality is the question of who has the access to resources, who controls it, and how much one receives. For instance, say the total value of resources available to a family of father, Mother, daughter and son is 100 ₹, and then the priority and the amount received by each of them, indicates the gender equality or inequality of that family. Therefore the question of women empowerment is shall not only directed to educate women to be more empowered and productively employed but also in attaining social justice through distribution of resources. It is struggle against the oppression and injustice experienced by the women under the cultural pretext of safety and protection. From that perspective even practices like dowry though illegal, can be used as the vehicle of women empowerment by changing its purpose and function. When daughter herself demands it from her parents and considers it as 'divorce security fund' to face future uncertainties of married relationship, it becomes a practice of pro-women empowerment.

Women empowerment movement in India

Women empowerment is associated historically in the west to three specific phases of women rights movement. In 19th and early 20th century suffrage, the right to vote was the key factor. The second wave

from 1960s included the sexual revolution and the role of women in society. The third wave consists of feminism from 1990s onwards. Rekha Pandey classifies the rise of feminism and the women's movement in India in two distinct phases, the pre-independence era and the post-independence era. And divides into three phases: First Phase (1850-1915), Second Phase (1915-1947), Third Phase (1947-Present). The third phase is further classified into three sub-phases: The Period of Accommodation (1947-1960s), The Period of Crisis (1960s-1975), 1975 – to date. (Rekha Pande,2018)

In the pre-independence era (1850-1915), the women movement began as a social reform movement in the 19th century. At this time, the western idea of liberty, equality and fraternity was being imbibed by Indian educated elite through the study of English and the contact with the West. This western liberalism was extended to the Women's question and was translated into a social reform movement. They did however share a common concern for rooting out the social evils, partly in response to charges of barbarity from the colonial rulers. The Indian intellectual reformer, sensitive to the power of colonial domination and responding to the western ideas of rationalism, liberalism and civilized society on one hand, also sought ways and means of resisting this colonial hegemony by resorting to a 'cultural defense' (K. N. Panikkar, 1975) through such reforms. This cultural defense led to a paradoxical situation. On the one side, influenced by new European ideas of rationalism and progress, the reformers tried to create a new, modern society, but on the other side yet rooted in Indian tradition. That resulted in an critical appraisal of Indian society and created a new ethos devoid of social aberrations like polytheism, polygamy, casteism, sati, child marriage, illiteracy – all of which they believed were impediments to the progress of women (Rekha Pande, 2009, p. 27).

The social reform movement neither radically challenged the existing patriarchal structure of society nor questioned the gender relation. Women were seen as passive recipients of a more humanitarian treatment to be given by western educated elite males. Thus it was an attempt to reform the women rather than reform the social conditions around them and there were no attempts to alter the power structure and the man-woman role relationships in society. The attempt was to create a new Indian woman, truly Indian and yet sufficiently educated and tutored in the 19th century values to suit the new emerging society. Thus education for girls was not meant to equip them to be self-sufficient, independent and emancipated and train them to follow some profession but to be good and presentable housewives, the mistress of the home and the hearth (Pande; J. Kameshwari, 1987). And whenever culture is being threatened an immediate response is an enforcement of women to remain in roles that are more traditional. In spite of its limitations, it cannot be denied that the

social reform movement did help in removing prejudices against women's education and provided a secular space for women in the public realm. The only space available to a woman earlier was in the religious sphere but women had to choose between this and the family and if they chose religion they had to move out of the families by becoming a part of the Sangha, ashram etc..

Gandhiji (1915-1947) legitimized and expanded Indian women's public activities by initiating them into the non-violent civil disobedience movement against the British raj. Gandhiji could draw in a large number of women to the political arena by giving a very broad meaning of swaraj, and helping them find dignity in public life and a new place in the national mainstream. The salt movement, had a lot of symbolic value for the women because salt connected them to their daily lives in the kitchen, and at Dandi, women marched from the kitchen to the forefront of Public realm. The male leadership other than Gandhiji at this time did not encourage a second line of leadership and women could assume leadership only when the men were in prison. Many of the women already felt that their struggle was two pronged, not only against the British overlords but also against patriarchy at home.

The Period of Accommodation (1947-1960s)

Due to the efforts of women and their role in the freedom struggle that women got the right to vote and complete equality in the constitution in India. Article 15(3) India, 1949, empowers the State to make special provisions for women. This resulted in the introduction of the franchise and civic rights of women in the Indian constitution. The state adopted a patronizing role towards women. Women in India did not have to struggle for basic rights as did women in the West. This was a period primarily of accommodation. Some of the organizations took up constitutional measures such as The Marriage Act of 1954 and The Hindu Code Bill of 1955-56, These bills took up the issue of marriage, divorce, succession, guardianship and adoption. The Hindu Marriage Act made monogamy legal, outlawed polygamy among all Hindus, and conferred equal rights of divorce on both men and women. It also made inter caste and interreligious marriages legal. It fixed the marriage age for boys and girls. It also made child marriage punishable. The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956, The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, The Maternity Benefits Act, 1961 were some other acts during this period. The NFIW (National Federation of Indian Women), wing of Communist Party of India, established in 1954 by several leaders including Aruna Asaf Ali, worked for the empowerment of women and women's rights. The National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) is affiliated to the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), composed primarily of women from socialist countries.

The Period of Crisis (late 1960s-1975)

Many women organizations began to take up issues like anti-dowry campaign, protests against eve teasing (the harassment of women in the street), obscenity, price rise, and against the hardships suffered by women living in slums. Some of the common issues included the division of housework, party politics, rape, and dowry deaths. The issues of violence, popularly called atrocities against women, became the centre piece of the movement in the early eighties and the cause for the movement's expansion. In the 1970s the New Women's movement attempted to revive the Uniform Civil Code within the framework of gender politics. But women's rights became articulated within a state-led reform agenda, re-inscribing the concerns of national integrity, modernity, and progress.

In 1974 the official Status of Women Commission published the report, on women's low and ever decreasing status in Indian society. Despite many progressive social legislations and constitutional guarantees, women's status had indeed not improved much. Women continued to have an inferior status in many areas like political, economic and social. It also stated some alarming facts with regards to employment, political participation and health status. The report pointed out to the naked fact that society had not yet succeeded in framing the required norms and institutions to enable women to fulfill their multiple roles. The report also pointed out that the concern for women and their problems which received an impetus during the freedom movement had suffered a decline in the last two decades (Government of India, 1975).

The Report pointed that the deep foundation of inequality is built in the minds through a socialization process, which continues to be extremely powerful. If education was to promote equality it must make a deliberate, planned and sustained effort. The educational system had not even attempted to undertake this responsibility. UGC (University Grants Commission), which was the nodal authority of higher education then, sent letters suggesting the starting of a program of Women's Studies and incorporating them in the curricula of Social Sciences for teaching and research. Many conferences, workshops and discussion groups took place to formulate clear guidelines, in order to help Universities, faculties, colleges and other institutions of higher learning to start such units.

1975 to Present

Since 1975, there has been a steady increase in the number of women's welfare organizations in India. Across the world today Women Studies have continued to critically engage with the notion of power and to radically transform the intellectual landscape. Indian Women commission Report (1974) pointed that the deep

foundation of inequality is built in the minds through a socialization process, and it continues to be extremely powerful. If education was to promote equality it must make a deliberate, planned and sustained effort. The educational system had not even attempted to undertake this responsibility. In view of this, UGC (University Grants Commission), the nodal authority of Indian higher education then, sent letters suggesting the starting of a program of Women's Studies and incorporating them in the curricula of Social Sciences for teaching and research. Many conferences, workshops and discussion groups took place to formulate clear guidelines, in order to help Universities, faculties, colleges and other institutions of higher learning to start such units. Very recently from year 2017-18 it marks a different trajectory.

The trend after 12th plan period (2017-18) is really disturbing for Women studies centers and the goal of gender equality. The table shows a positive growth 17.28 % in the number of colleges in 12th plan (2017-18) period and after (2022-23). There is a positive growth of 20% in the number of universities in the same period. On the contrary total financial outlay for women studies centers shows a considerable negative growth (-) 17.19% for the period after the 12th plan, and on current prices the negative growth reaches drastic heights and stands with 41.63%. What does this trend could mean? Does this mean the women empowerment and gender equality is already achieved by the Indian society? Does this mean that the UGC finds women study centers are outdated and unwanted? Is educating women and society at large, through such centers for gender equality, is a challenge to the existing cultural ethos? Does this reflect not only a stagnation but also loss of faith by UGC on such courses for gender equality and social justice? Does this mean that women studies centers shall also starts courses like 'Brides-to be' or 'Daughters Pride- Beti Meri Abhiman' as proposed by IIT BHU?.(Deccan Chronicle, 2018) Interestingly a comment, from a director, women studies centre from a women university at a private discussion, is worth mentioning. She asked, 'Can't anyone read what is written on the walls, Sanskari Bahu-Neibhours envy, the only course that guarantees the transformation of Indian women into a Bharatiya Nari. Of course there is nothing wrong if a student wants to undertake a course like 'brides to be' or 'sanskari bahu, but there again the attempt is to reform the women but not to reform the socio-cultural practices that support gender inequality.

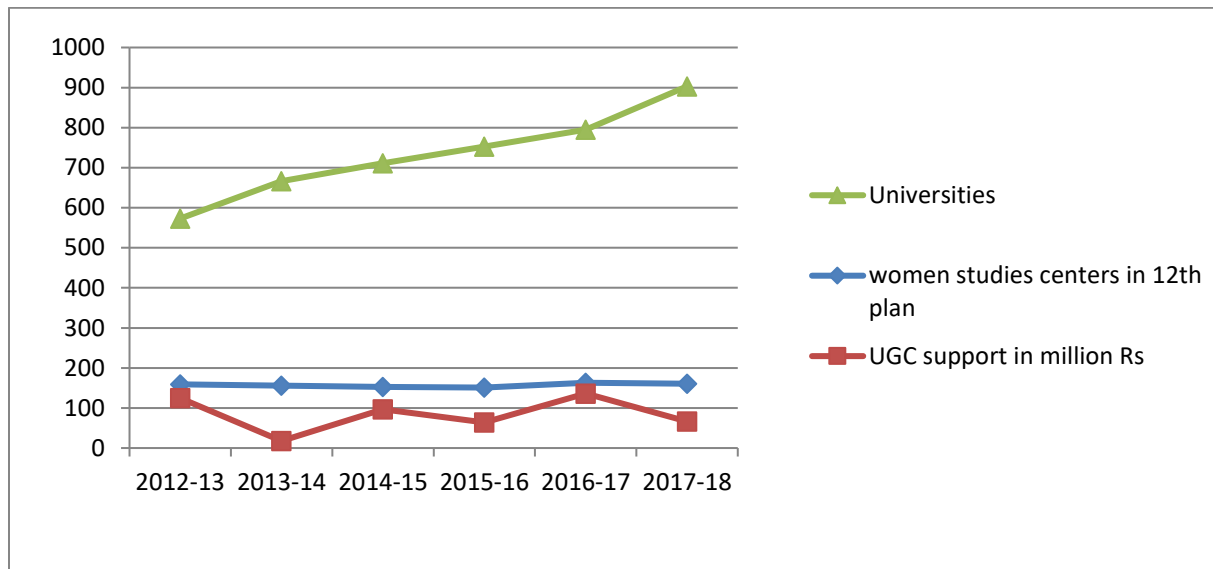
Trend of women studies centers and UGC financial support 12th plan period and after

Year	Number of Women studies centres	Total number of colleges	Total number of universities	Total Financial support from UGC in crores	12 th Plan period (Total crores)	current prices
2012-13	159	37204	573	12.48		

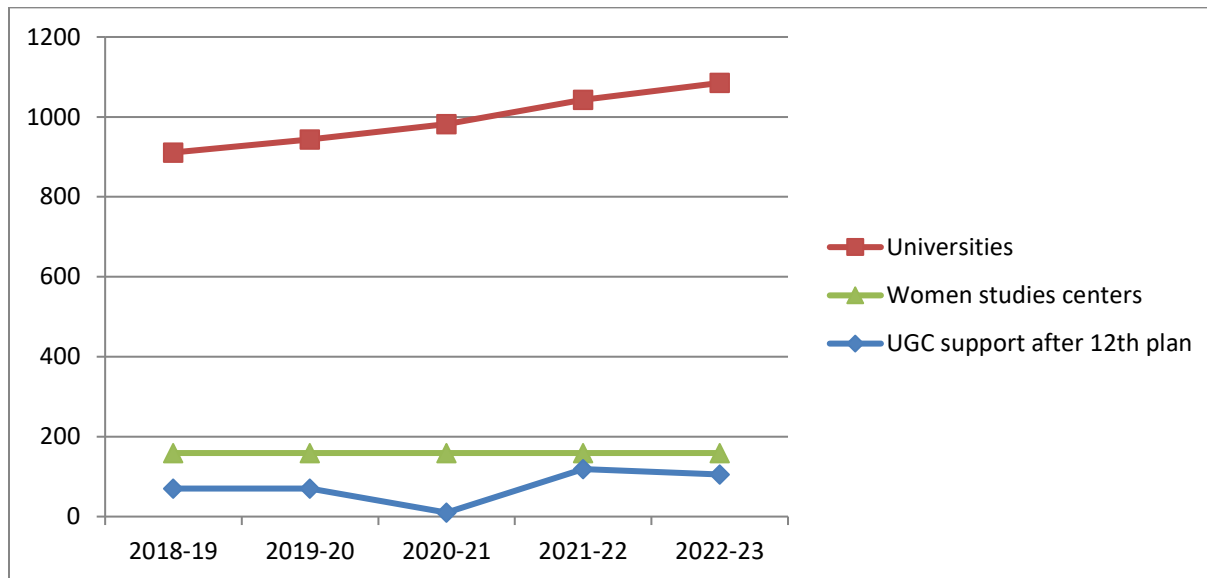
2013-14	156	39613	666	1.77		
2014-15	153	40760	711	9.68		
2015-16	151	41435	753	6.37		63 .00
2016-17	163	42338	795	13.62	*43.92	
2017-18	161	51024	903	6.62		
					After 12th Plan period	
2018-19	159	52660	911	7.00		
2019-20	159	56153	944	7.00		
2020-21	159	57837	982	1.00		
2021-22	159	57302	1043	11.88	36.37	36.37
2022-23	159	59846	1085	10.57		
	(-) 1.24%	17.28%	20%		(-) 17.19%	(-)41.63%

(Source: UGC annual reports 2012-13 -2022-23)

UGC Financial support for Women studies at 12th Plan



UGC financial support for women studies centers after 12th plan



Global Gender Gap Report: World Economic Forum

Global Gender Gap report published annually by the World Economic Forum is an internationally accepted data on Gender inequality. The goals of this report are as follows. “The first goal is to measure gender-based gaps in access to resources and opportunities rather than actual levels of the available resources and opportunities. That makes the Gender Gap Index independent of the level of development. Rich countries have more education and health opportunities for all members of society, in relation to poorer countries. However Gender Gap Index rewards countries for smaller gaps in access to these resources regardless of the overall levels of resources, since the levels may be quite independent of the gender-related issues faced by each country at their own level of income. Thus, for example, the index penalizes or rewards countries based on the size of the gap between women and men on enrolment rates, but not for the overall levels of education in the country.” (Gender Gap Report, 2006, p.5)

World Gender Gap Ranking India Vs Bangladesh

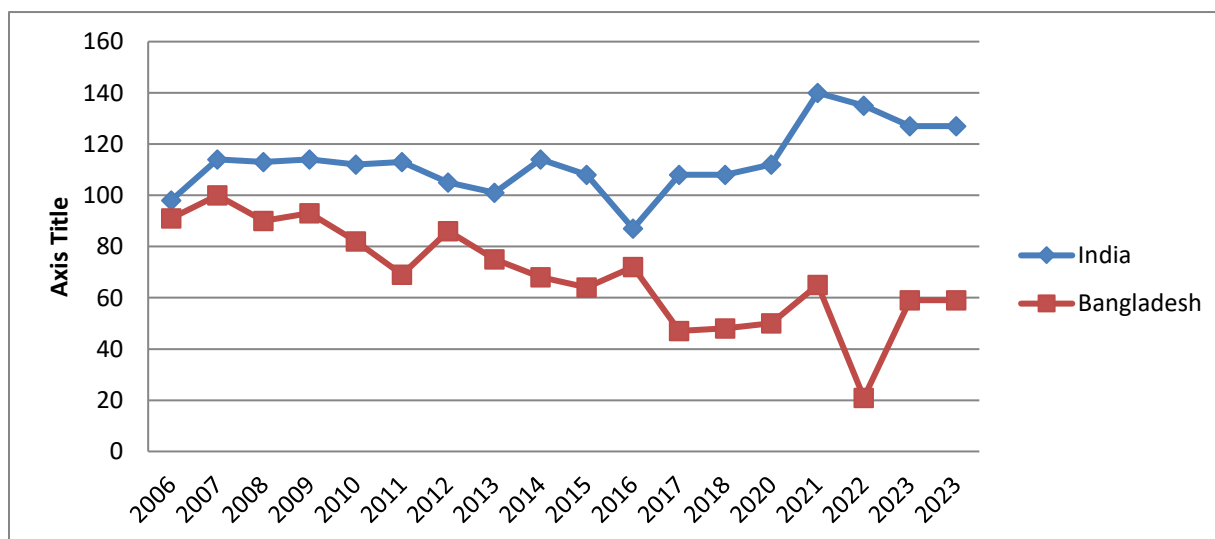
Year	India	Bangladesh
2006	98	91
2007	114	100
2008	113	90
2009	114	93
2010	112	82
2011	113	69
2012	105	86

2013	101	75
2014	114	68
2015	108	64
2016	87	72
2017	108	47
2018	108	48
2019	NA	NA
2020	112	50
2021	140	65
2022	135	21
2023	127	59

(Source: Global Gender Gap Report 2006-2023)

The comparison between India and Bangladesh is considered because of two reasons. Both of them belong to same region, similar cultural backgrounds and both of them starts at similar levels or with a difference of very close margin in 2006.

Trend: Global Gender Gap Ranking India VS Bangladesh



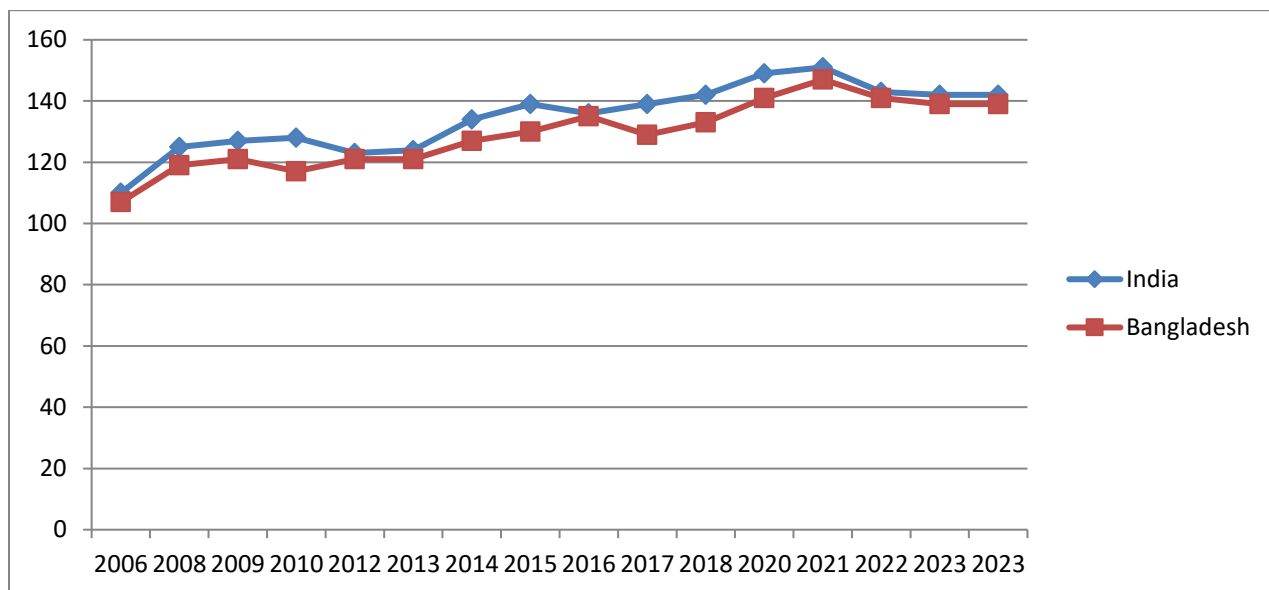
Interestingly in 2006 both countries start at very close levels of Gender Gap rankings. As the trend shows Bangladesh steadily improves its ranking and shows decent level of Gender equity among South Asian

countries. The Indian trajectory also shows similar trend of improving the rankings up to 2014, then trajectory begins to fluctuate and Gender Gap and inequality is on rise except in 2016.

Gender Gap Index Parameters

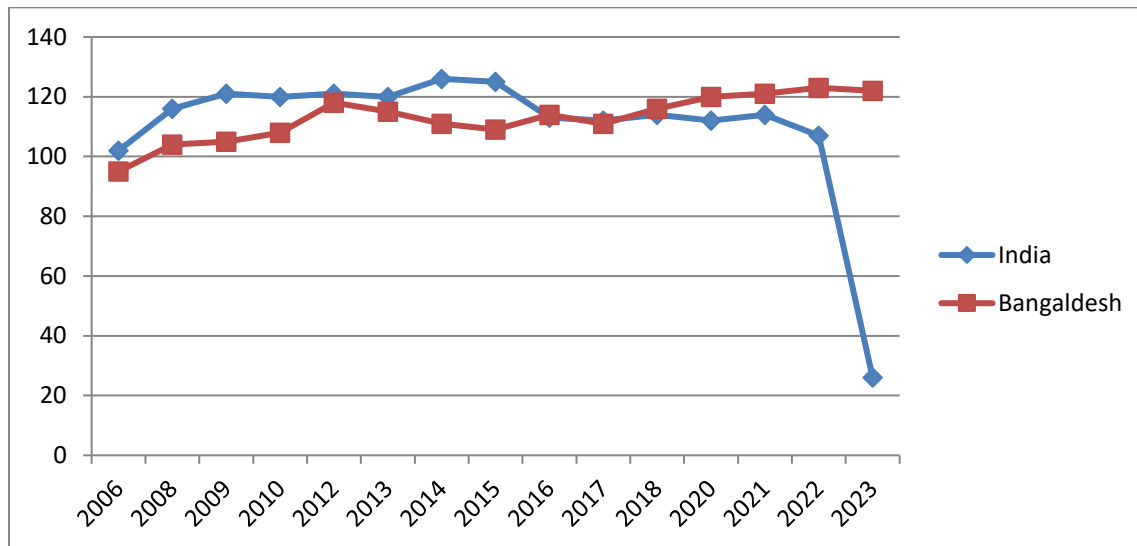
Gender Gap index analyses data based on four parameters: Economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment.

Trend: Economic participation and opportunities India VS Bangladesh



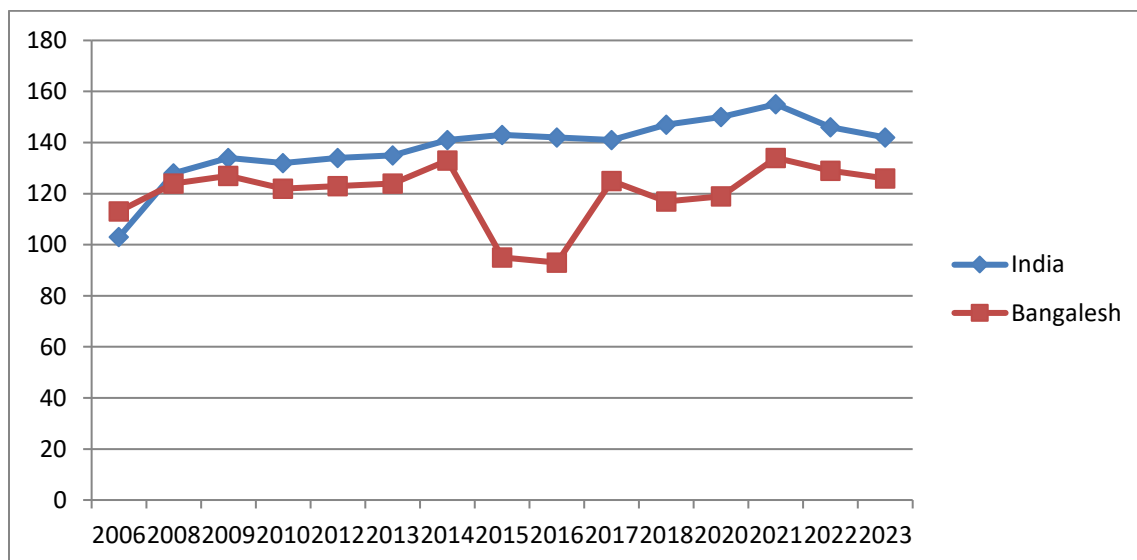
India and Bangladesh shows similar trends of steady increase in gender gap in economic participation and opportunities parameter. Gender Gap and inequality experienced by women in these countries in economic opportunities are on increase than decreasing. Bangladesh records better rankings than India on all years under consideration.

Trend: Educational attainment India VS Bangladesh



With regard to educational attainment, India makes drastic improvements than Bangladesh. For Bangladesh gender inequality in educational attainment is steadily increasing throughout the years from 2006 to 2023. India changes its trajectory at 2016- 17 and registers drastic improvement in rankings up to 2023. [India scored 1.00 (0-1 range, where 0= no equality, 1 = 100% equality) based on literacy rate of females over males, and primary, secondary and tertiary level enrolment of females over males in educational institutions]

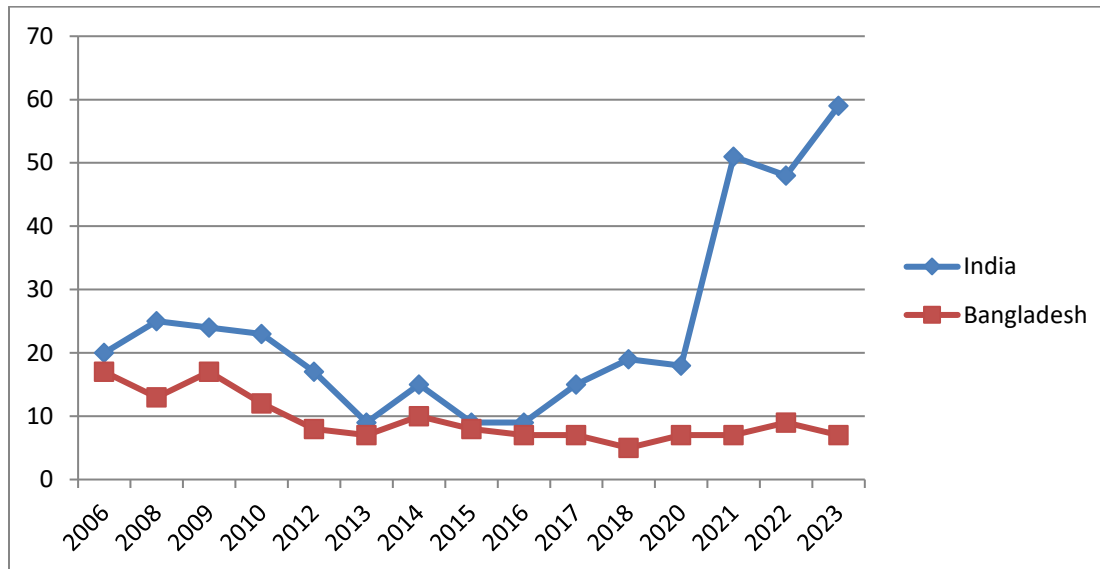
Trend: Health and survival India Vs Bangladesh



With regard to health and survival ranking, gender gap gradually increases for India. Though India registers a better ranking in 2006 than Bangladesh, Bangladesh improves the gender gap and continues to perform

with better rankings. Bangladesh registers much better rankings on its achievements on Health and survival in 2015&2016.

Trend : Political empowerment rankings, India Vs Bangladesh



Bangladesh improves steadily its gender gap ranking on political empowerment. India registers better ranking up to 2013 and in 2014 marks fluctuations on the trend and gender inequality on political empowerment is growing drastically up to 2023.

Analyzing all the trends, together, it can be found that gender inequality and gender gap is steadily on rise in India on parameters of Economic participation and Health and survival.

Analyzing the other three graphs, it can be found the general trajectory changes or fluctuates in year 2014-2015. Overall ranking trend and trend on political empowerment shows unfavourable growth whereas trend on educational attainment shows a favorable growth. Both the trajectory of favorable growth (equality) and unfavorable growth (inequality) shows 2014-15 as the period of change of direction of the trajectory. If one argues that these trajectory changes corresponds to the policy measures taken by the polity of a nation, then the question is what happened to the policy making in India, in 2014-15? Answer becomes very obvious, there was an central election and the new government came into power with right wing ideology of Hindutva. Therefore a probable logical conclusion that one may reach, is that policy making based on rightwing Hindutva ideology is anti-gender equality, anti-women empowerment and anti-women. Can it be true? If political dispensation in power does not make policy measures to improve the gender equality, how it can be the fault of Hindutva ideology? The ideology has strong inclination towards majoritarian cultural revivalism based on Hindu cultural ethos. Revival of cultural ethos based on majoritarian religious ethos

leads to quasi cultural theocracy than a democracy. Cultural theocratic ideologies are cannot but be anti-gender equality by default. Maximum what they can do is a Tokenism. At best they are oriented to reform the women and making them to adjust to the majoritarian cultural ethos, which was and is patriarchal. It was this same socialization process in the patriarchal cultural ethos was identified as major bottleneck towards attaining gender equality by Women commission report in 1974. Therefore if gender equality to be improved in India then women in general and women empowerment activists in particular shall strive to free the policy making from such cultural theocratic tendencies. Secular democracy based on ideals of equality, fraternity and liberty is the only hope for women empowerment and gender equality in India.

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