

Sakuntala Narasimhan. *Empowering Women: An Alternative Strategy from Rural India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999. Indian Rupees 195.00. (Paperback). 236pp.

The positive role of women in economic development cannot be understated; those that are educated and properly empowered can act as catalysts in the development process. This book is about how to empower women so that they can become independent and self-sustaining actors in development.

The conventional wisdom is that women's empowerment depends on following a simple strategy—alleviate poverty by spending large amounts of money. Having followed this strategy in the past the author feels that it has been far from successful. Monetary inputs by itself is not a sufficient condition to assist women in improving their status. The author puts forward an alternate view that the reasons why women are disadvantaged in India, despite fifty years of development, is due to their ignorance, powerlessness and vulnerability. This is particularly so for those women who belong to the Scheduled Castes (Harijans) and Scheduled Tribes (Girijans or “mountain people”).

After a brief introduction in which the author highlights the plight of women, Chapter 2 of the book reviews past state initiatives that have been implemented from time to time to improve the status of women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes of which this book is a case study. To summarise very briefly, it was expected that the fruits of development would permeate through all strata of society thereby benefiting them. However, this was not to be and the various state initiatives did not have any appreciable impact on the economic well-being of the Harijans and ‘the mountain people’.

Chapter 4 of the book is significant as it outlines the alternative strategy followed for empowering women. This strategy was developed by a non-governmental organisation going by the acronym AWARE (Action for Welfare and Awakening in Rural Environment). The strategy focusses on increasing the self-esteem motivating the rural poor to come out of their state of helplessness. Once this has been achieved, economic assistance is then provided to the community for development projects, which, however, depend on the priorities of that community. In other words, the wishes of the community have to be seriously taken into consideration when identifying these development projects. Following such an unconventional strategy has brought about a significant change in the quality of life of the women belonging to the scheduled castes (Harijans) and scheduled tribes (Girijans).

Chapter 5 discusses the impact of the empowerment strategy, both in its economic as well as its psychological and social perspectives. The interesting result that surfaces reveals that it is the psychological and social effects that have been more important and economic gains are a consequence of these effects. This is the central message of the book—pouring money into programmes of poverty alleviation will not succeed unless and until the non-economic issues are addressed first—by creating

awareness and generally improving the psychological well-being of the target population and then focusing on the economic aspects. Chapter 7 examines the reasons for the success of the AWARE experiment from an independent perspective. Chapter 8 presents and discusses selected case studies while Chapter 9 concludes the book.

The author has successfully presented an alternative strategy for rural development in India which focuses on women's empowerment. The book highlights the fact that unless the preconceived notions of the policy-makers, and bureaucrats does not change their policies will have no impact on the status of women. The book is well written, concise and easily understandable to a new comer on women's issues. It also provides an interesting perspective on these issues which are not part of the conventional wisdom, thereby causing a lively debate in the area of womens' issues. An index and bibliography add to the value of the book.

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