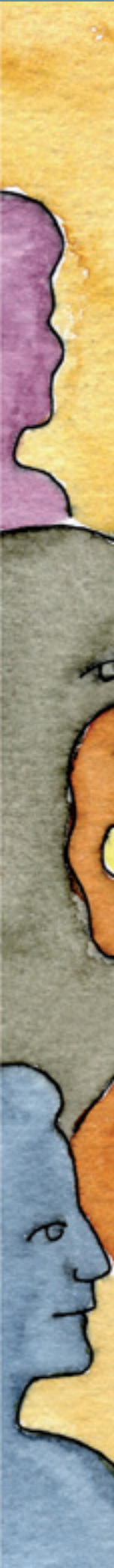




The EU's Contribution to Women's Rights and Women's Inclusion: Aspects of Democracy Building in South Asia, with special reference to India

Monica Das, Associate Professor in Economics, Delhi University



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Abstract

The cultural construct of Indian society determines the mindset of India's people, reinforcing existing gender biases against women. The country faces challenges related to poverty, education, employment opportunities and addressing issues of gender inequity. Globalization has increased the casualization of the economy as well as the size of the informal economy. Inequalities have increased and women are affected disproportionately. Among the most important factors for women's autonomy are the right to land, control of local markets, and access through education and training to occupations that enhance their self-esteem. Women with no control over expenditure or access to the market lose authority at home. Women's real political participation is also important.

There are also opportunities and potential in India. India has a large proportion of young people, which represents immense potential for the labour market. With proper education, employment opportunities and healthcare, this group can drive the economy in the right direction. The focus on ecological and environmental work could provide entry points for raising women's issues and ensuring the inclusion of women. Women are the bulk of the agricultural labour force, and they can play an important role in its development while at the same time altering gender structures in order to increase equality.

The European Union's intended support for democracy building puts it in a position to support changes in state institutions and political processes. It can play a facilitating role, but this role must be clear and well thought out.

Summary of Recommendations

The EU should network with established institutions and organizations on women's issues. Field activity at the grass roots level should be initiated and enhanced and success stories publicized over time.

The EU could fund the setting up of a chain of training institutions, at the regional, provincial and national levels, mandated to develop the capacities of elected representatives and government officials with a special focus on gender responsive governance. This would have the potential to help women representatives in local government with ensuring implementation of national commitments on women's human rights. India could become a flagship country and this could later be extended to other areas of South Asia.

The EU could launch a gender sensitization module interwoven with an environment sensitization component and try to implement it across the schools of India. It could also take advantage of the opportunity provided by the recent invitation by Pratibha Patil, the President of India, to set up innovation universities. Last but not least, the EU needs to work on improving its credibility and visibility.

1. Introduction

There is no denying the fact that the European Union's (EU) intention to address the issues of poverty, development and gender inequities through democratic means is most welcome. Democracy is an instrument that is seemingly in a position to deliver on these objectives, although there are formidable bottlenecks in the economic and political systems of different countries, which contribute to negative outcomes.

The EU has a track record of giving democracy a fair chance, and of addressing problems related to gender equality and development. The EU is therefore in a position to draw up fresh, region-specific charters. The buzzword for India and South Asia is 'inclusive growth'. There is immense scope for EU involvement in this area.

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The term 'South Asia' is of recent origin. South Asia is a 'region without regionalism', to quote Peter Lyon (1969). Issues of cooperation are held hostage to the primacy of political forces in the region. The role of India in South Asia can best be understood as 'first among equals', a concept which emphasizes the sovereign equality of all participants but refers to the specific obligations and responsibilities of India as a major power in the region.

In the case of India, its socio-economic, cultural and political background must be taken into consideration. In India, the cultural construct of society is a major factor to reckon with, since it dictates matters that form socio-economic patterns. This cultural construct also determines the mindset of India's people, which in turn reinforces existing gender biases against women – although ideational and cultural turns in social science precipitate matters. We must also keep in mind the issues of globalization, transnationality and migration, as well as diversity and its intersections. The welfare regime should also be a focus when discussing India.

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India has had 20 years of economic reform, during which unfettered economic activity has been allowed. People had apprehensions that this might expose India to predators and colonizers, but the new world order had inbuilt safeguards

to help it stand its ground. If nothing else, India has gained visibility and been able to command global attention for all the right reasons.

Globalization and India's integration into the world economy are matters of macro-economic importance. The world economy is going through an unprecedented economic crisis which started in the financial sector but has now spread. The growth prospects of the emerging economies have been undermined by the ongoing crisis, with considerable variations across countries.

In India, a number of prudential measures have been put in place incrementally over the past five years in order to maintain stability in the financial system. These measures in conjunction with the overall cautious approach to financial and external sector liberalization have contributed to domestic macroeconomic and financial stability. So far, the macroeconomic impact of the global financial turmoil has been relatively muted due to the overall strength of domestic demand and some of the inherent strengths of the democratic system – its other weaknesses notwithstanding.

The visionary 'one world' concept can no longer be ignored. Cross-regional and transnational issues are important in the light of the opening up of borders. This is where the question of legitimate external participation arises. It is here that the EU and its well intentioned programmes can make itself visible and can increase the scope of its activity.

2. Democracy and Democracy Support

We all agree that we need democracy – for the explicit reason that democracy empowers citizens with the freedom to choose. This remains invaluable even if the right to choose is eroded and manipulated from time to time in politics. Democracy, warts and all, remains our best bet, and the right to choose extends to the economic market place and the economic arena in general.

The rationale for democracy and liberal economic politics is the same. Both empower citizens through the freedom to choose. Democratization cannot be thought of as merely a diffusion of some fixed model. There is a dynamic ideology which presupposes that new institutions will be created and democracy will have to be redefined periodically. Democracy will also develop structures of transnational power.

The EU, with its intention to support democracy building, is in a position to suggest changes to state institutions and political processes in order that policies and programmes are implemented properly. The EU can play a facilitating role, but this must be carefully thought out and there must be clear roadmaps.

Some may question the EU's real interest: What does the EU gain? Why does it want to do all this work? Its intentions must be made transparent and be convincing. Governments might be wary of external initiatives, however innocuous they may seem. For example, Kyrgyzstan provides a striking instance of the dangers of the United States meddling in the name of democracy. It is generally believed that the US crusade for democracy has destabilized the country – and with it the whole of Central Asia.

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3. India, Women's Rights and the Status of Women

Regardless of the impact of the global economic crisis on India, the country faces many continuing challenges, such as poverty eradication, improving the physical and social infrastructure, education, creating employment opportunities and addressing issues of gender inequity. Inclusive growth and faster social development are key buzzwords. In this context, talking about the status of women is a natural corollary.

Globalization has increased the casualization of the economy and the size of its informal sector. It has accelerated the process of the proletarianization of labour. Inequalities have increased. Women, predictably enough, have been adversely affected: 95 per cent of women workers are engaged in the informal sector and increased informalization has added to their problems. Men and women have differential access to job opportunities. Women, for example, are engaged in greater numbers in low-wage jobs in the agricultural sector and have a lower level of labour force participation.

Marriage-related migration is increasing. Marriage is a pivotal institution in India and it has far-reaching macro-economic impacts. According to Ministry of Women and Child Development statistics, the bride is underage in 48 per cent of Indian marriages, which is illegal. There is also an overlap between the problems of bigamy and polygamy and underage marriage.

There is much discussion of India as one of the youngest nations in the world. According to the 2001 census, 41 per cent of the population is under 34 years of age. Some estimate the figure to be 53 per cent. The average age in China in 2020 will be 37, compared to 29 in India. This represents immense potential for the labour market. With proper education, employment opportunities and healthcare, this group is certain to drive the economy in the right direction. EU involvement in this field will be crucial. Around half of this group is female, and they are lagging behind. Involving youth in community service or social service and linking school curricula with social services could increase the sphere of EU activity and might provide entry points for democracy building support.

India's economic scene has many flaws. Public policy and law in India are well thought out and are in place. The problem is implementation, due to a lack of monitoring and a general lack of accountability. A recent report by the chairperson of the Ministry of Rural Development on how to increase the effectiveness of some Government programmes affords interesting insights (*The Times of India*, 2009). It identifies the problem as not the scarcity of food grain but its distribution. The Government of India has a surplus of 30 million tonnes of food grains, but close to two million children under the age of five die in India every year and over one million of these deaths can be attributed to malnutrition and hunger.

According to a recent United Nation Children's fund estimate (UNICEF, 2009), India accounts for 31 per cent of the developing world's children with stunted growth and 42 per cent of those who are underweight. It has been observed that levels of child nutrition are better in societies where women enjoy relatively greater opportunities and freedom, and there is greater gender equality. National Family and Health Survey data for 2005–2006 show that the incidence of malnutrition among Indian children born to illiterate mothers (52 per cent) is almost three times higher than the levels among mothers who have completed 12 years of education (18 per cent). It is interesting

that undernourishment and poverty levels do not go hand in hand. National Sample Survey (NSS) data for 2004–2005 estimate poverty at 28 per cent, but the same survey indicates calorie deficiencies among 70 per cent of the population. Equating poverty and hunger is a clear fallacy (Economic and Political Weekly, 2010).

A randomized control trial reported in *The Lancet* (Wellcome Trust, 2010) conducted in the poorest parts of Jharkhand and Orissa shows how a 45 per cent reduction in infant mortality can be achieved by speaking to women directly. It is the inclusion of women that achieved results.

4. Gender Power Relations

‘I can climb a coconut tree, but will my husband wash my child – never’ (Woman farmer, Maharashtra) .

The prevalent gender structure circumscribes the behaviour and actions of women and men and underpins the relations between them. Among the most important factors for women’s autonomy are the right to land, control of local markets, and access through education and training to occupations that enhance self-esteem. Women with no control over expenditure or access to the market lose authority at home.

The level of women’s political participation also presents a dismal picture. A critical mass of women is necessary to ensure women’s representation, but the quality of representation is just as important. Electing token women is not of much consequence. Gender is central to how societies assign roles, responsibilities, resources and rights. The allocation, distribution, utilization and control of resources are dependent on gender relations, which are embedded in both ideology and practice.

Unfortunately, even today gender apartheid exists in most parts of the world – to the disadvantage of women. According to the World Bank, women constitute 70 per cent of the world’s 1.3 billion poor. It is therefore almost inevitable that gender equality becomes synonymous with the rights of women and discussions on women and poverty. In India, women and children account for 73 per cent of those below the poverty line. Women workers are perceived as more tractable and subservient – and more as subsidiary workers who can accept lower wages. Women are also hit by labour saving techniques, innovation, retrenchment and the general fall-out from economic slowdown.

Failure to address issues of conflict at the community and household levels could undermine the social sustainability of ‘gender mainstreaming’. Gender equity in resource management requires more than ‘gender balance’ in programmes.

The Indian Planning Commission’s mid-term appraisal report of the tenth Five-year Development Plan (April 2002 to March 2007) lists 59 priority actions that it says could yield immediate results. Gender concerns are not separately addressed in any of these priority actions. However, a separate section on ‘Women and Child Development’ lists two priority areas: the need to restructure the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) to integrate crèche services and pre-school education; and the need to move beyond gender budgeting (i.e. ensuring separate allocation for women in all programmes) to improve mechanisms for measuring the outcome for women of various development programmes.

Gender mainstreaming became prominent internationally in the late 1980s as a strategy for integrating gender issues into all areas of policy and all programmes at every stage – from the identification of need, to project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Although this was presented as an improvement on the earlier strategy of separate programmes for women, even after the elapse of three decades the results do not paint a rosy picture.

The role of women in environmental protection activities

Environmental activism and management are areas that might be developed to strengthen the familial and social status of women. This would be particularly significant in India in the light of the increasing feminization of agriculture. Advocacy of eco-feminism stands on firm ground in view of women's biological, protective and maternal roles. Women can be safely said to play major roles in the build-up of social capital.

In recent years, research by the women's movement and academics in South Asia has effectively asserted women's centrality in conserving biological diversity and managing local ecosystems and resources. Women constitute the major part of the labour force in subsistence crop production, agriculture and seafood harvesting. Observations in the field show that Joint Forest Management (JFM) may be increasing the amount of women's labour while continuing to keep them out of the decision-making process. It is becoming increasingly clear that JFM has been unable to address gender-related issues within the household and the village. JFM has not made clear provisions for women's representation. Households are represented most often by men and women have little say in management matters. It has been further observed that women spend most of their time on fuel wood collection and are left out of the ambit of other forest produce (Sumi Krishna, 2008).

These concerns provided the impetus for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to adopt a 'Sustainable Livelihood Approach' (SLA) as one of its main planks. UNDP defines this as 'the capability of people to make a living and improve their quality of life without jeopardizing the livelihood options of others, either now or in the future'. The approach promises a poverty reduction strategy through linking employment with the social dimensions of sustainability and equity.

Eco-farming creates new eco-jobs and multiple livelihood opportunities in the villages. The bio-village eco-technology model has been able to identify relevant technologies and facilitate 'eco-enterprises' for asset creation – especially for small groups of poor women.

The evolution of grass roots women's groups and federations of groups, and the emergence of local leadership are high points of the bio-village. As the emergent women leaders point out, because the approach is one of learning by doing, their illiteracy is not an obstacle in the process of acquiring new skills.

The 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution invests local bodies with control over local resources and the authority to shape patterns of local land use and development. The law is revolutionary in reserving one-third of the elected seats of grassroots governance bodies for women. This is a laudable move, but ridden with many loopholes and male manipulations.

The National Water Policy speaks of making necessary legal and institutional changes at various levels to ensure an appropriate role for women. The criterion for membership of these bodies is land ownership and women do not possess land in their own names. Thus, although there has been some progress, poor tribal and rural women have not gained a greater or more sustained voice in resource management through such local bodies.

In sum, various developmental initiatives are being undertaken in India but, due to inherent anomalies in the initiatives or provisions, the end results have been disappointing. Concerted action is imperative, with a focus on outcomes, accountability and the need for a paradigm shift in women's lives.

5. What the EU Can Do

EU initiatives on democracy building and development cooperation are channelled through instruments such as the European Development Fund, the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Development Cooperation Instrument and the European Initiative on Democracy and Human Rights. Awareness among its partners of EU activities is lacking. The EU should do more to publicise its success stories.

The EU also needs to increase its credibility. Linking its work with environmental concerns will be of paramount importance to its ability to reach women. From the angle of social marketing the EU's unique selling point is democracy building. Its programmes must be time limited and geared to yielding positive results. They will be successful if they are concordant with India's national policy framework.

Networking with established institutions and eminent organizations should be included on the EU's partnership agenda. Partnerships with existing nodal institutions and departments such as the National Commission for Women, the Ministry of Women and Children, the Ministry of Youth Affairs, and so on, are suggested entry points. Such work would also increase the EU's visibility and credibility. Field activity at the grass roots level has to be initiated and enhanced and success stories enunciated over time.

The mandatory 30 per cent allocation of funds to all departments, under the federal structure, for women's development is being observed in its breach. Unutilized funds granted to the states by the Finance Commission/Planning Commission are returned to central Government every year. This is an area where the EU could contribute to facilitating a solution.

Academics, elite members and non-governmental organizations are familiar with organizations such as UNESCO, UNIFEM and UNDP, but the EU's instruments are more obscure. Existing tie-ups with universities and educational institutions, especially departments that deal with social work and sociology, should be brought under special focus. It is important that the EU makes its presence felt in the knowledge economy. This may be assisted by a new bill liberalizing the entry of foreign universities into India.

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The EU could fund the setting up of a chain of training institutions, at the regional, provincial and national levels, that would be mandated to develop the capacities of elected representatives and government officials with a special focus on gender responsive governance. Motivating mechanisms and incentives could be included at every stage. This could potentially help women representatives in local government to ensure the implementation of national commitments on women's human rights. India can become a flagship country and this scheme could later be extended to other areas of South Asia.

The EU could also institute a catalytic mechanism for collective efforts by various women's groups to draw up a strong women's agenda. The EU could work with civil society groups and tap their lobbying potential.

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At the risk of appearing to go a little overboard, I would suggest that the EU could subscribe to a strategy of 'catching them young' by launching a gender sensitization module interwoven with an environmental sensitization component. It could try to implement this across schools in the whole of India. The EU could also take the opportunity provided by the recent invitation from Pratibha Patil, the President of

India, to set up innovation universities, which are meant to fill the gap in research and tackle new areas or problems of significance to India.

Men's support for women's issues is of crucial importance. The EU could structure its civil society participation in order to achieve this end. Welfare associations in the urban areas and block level, tehsil level (lowest subdivision level) and district level bodies in the rural areas can provide feedback on whether the fruits of growth are reaching the target population.

In terms of the EU's visibility, its initiatives appear nebulous while the efforts of individual countries such as Sweden and Norway are very much in the limelight. The EU is not perceptible as a separate entity. Its cohesiveness is not visible and definitely not palpable. Despite being its major trading partner, the EU has done little to establish holistic ties with India.

Census surveys will be carried out in India in 2010. The EU could provide new ideas to be incorporated into the process of data collection. The contribution of women to GDP could perhaps be one.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to some key elements of the development of India. First, globalization is equated with a new regime of spatiality founded on the transnationalization of the economy and society. The era of globalization has resulted in the merger of global capital with Indian monopoly capital, resulting in a steep rise in the potential and strength of the corporate sector. Whether there have been any trickle down effects is a moot point.

As a corollary to this, it should be noted that the regional political parties have been more active in the states where regional business groups have been most dynamic and assertive. How far regional aspirations have been satisfied in this process remains open to question.

Grass roots realities must be understood for the sake of transformational politics. Decentralization is the instrument through which democratization can be effected and granting more power to grass roots governance bodies (the *panchayats*) is key to the success of the whole process of decentralization and democratization.

The fact of the potentially unequal fallout from India's underlying growth strategy, by attaching a premium to market-driven as opposed to state-driven growth, is disquieting.¹ The 'second generation' of reforms has yet to be undertaken in any significant measure. This provides the backdrop for the EU to figure out how it can step in to mitigate matters and provide the necessary synergy.

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About the Author

Dr Monica Das is Associate Professor in Economics at Gargi College and a fellow at the Developing Countries Research Centre, Delhi University, India. Her field of interest is Gender Economics. She is a member of Iaffe (International Association for feminist Economics), based in Washington DC. She is the author of *Her Story So Far: Tales of the Girl Child in India* (Penguin, 2003) and *The Other Woman* (Harper Collins, 2010), an edited volume which draws attention to the issue of the socio-economic impact of underage marriage, bigamy and polygamy on the Human Development index and Gender development index.

¹ As a result of the recent unwinding of the stimulus package total expenditures relative to GDP, which rose from 15.7 per cent to 17.7 per cent between 2008–2009 and 2009–10, are slated to slip to 16 per cent in 2010–11. The fiscal and revenue deficits are also to decline from 6.7 per cent and 5.3 per cent, respectively, in 2009–2010 to 5.5 per cent and 4 per cent in 2010–11.