

# Malaysian Indian women and social development

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## Introduction

Before we can discuss the position of Malaysian Indian women and social development, we have to clarify the basic concept of social development. *Social development* first appeared as a category in the Fifth Malaysia Plan (1985 - 1990). Prior to this, in the Fourth Malaysia Plan there was a sectoral categorization of *Culture, Community Development, Security and General Administration*. In the Third Malaysia Plan it appeared as *Community Services and General Administration*, while in the Second and First Malaysia Plans it was categorized as *Social and Community Services*. It is clear that this sector has not remained consistent in terms of categorization. Concepts have been added or deleted with each plan proposal, with little objective rationalization. In the Fifth Malaysia Plan the sector classification of social development is introduced with the brief explanatory note that it has been included in view of its contribution towards national development. Its main objective is to inculcate positive values oriented towards community development, self reliance and nationhood. The programmes under this categorization include

- a. *culture*
- b. *youth*
- c. *sports*
- d. *information and broadcasting*
- e. *social welfare and*
- f. *community development.*

The justification for these six being grouped together under social development is as follows.

“Programmes under culture were designed mainly for the promotion of integration and unity through the development of a national culture. Programmes for youths emphasized on forging discipline, unity and self-reliance. Sports and recreation programmes promoted a healthy disciplined, united and productive society. Social welfare services assisted the disadvantaged and the needy to enable them to become productive and useful members of society”.

(Fifth Malaysia Plan, p. 533).

There is no indepth discussion defining the scope of social development or its implications for development of the other sectors listed in the New Economic Policy (NEP). In reality the crucial concept of social development is inseparable from progress in the other sectors like poverty eradication, housing, health and

education. As it stands in the Fifth Malaysia Plan, it is only a superficial attempt at coming to terms with social development. In reality *Social development* is a more comprehensive concept, involving all facets of life.

While it is difficult to arrive at a concise definition of *social development*, it is an even greater task to relate it to the position of women in general and Malaysian Indian women in particular. *Social development* of Malaysian Indian women has to be viewed from the field of *employment, education, the household, the community and society*. It is a total concept involving all facets of woman's life. Hence to relate this concept to the position of Malaysian Indian Women, this paper proposes the following sub-categories:

- A. Social Development of Malaysian Indian Women In Employment
- B. Social Development of Malaysian Indian Women Within The Household
- C. Social Development of Malaysian Indian Women Within The Community and Society

**A. Social Development of Malaysian Indian Women In Employment.**

In Peninsular Malaysia the participation rate of women in the labour force rose from 44.3 per cent in 1985 to 46.7 per cent in 1990. The participation of women in estates increased from 49 per cent in 1986 to slightly above 50 per cent in the nineties. The manufacturing sector registered an increase in total female employment from 8.1 per cent in 1970 to 24.3 per cent in 1990. Employment of women in the services sector, particularly community social and personal services, increased from 16.4 per cent in 1970 to 21.4 per cent in 1990. In the public sector, employment of women increased from 29.3 per cent in 1985 to 32.9 per cent in 1990. It is fairly evident that the employment status of women in general has changed significantly. While the statistics for the participation of Indian Women in these sectors is not readily available, some basic trends by two major sectors can be determined i.e. the estates and factories.

**(a) Indian Women In Estates**

Indian women workers in the estate sector in Peninsular Malaysia have played a vital role in the labour force since the later part of the nineteenth century. Today Indian women outnumber their male counterparts on estates, particularly in rubber, tea and pineapple estates. The phenomenon of female headed homes is also on the increase. However the estate structure has adapted the social roles of women for its own purposes. The exploitation of women, workers is still reflected in the economic and social, position of women in the estates today. While women workers receive equal wages when compared to men, their monthly, earnings, still average lower than men.



- (xi) Greater participation of women in unions to enhance their bargaining power and to break the gender bias in these organizations.
- (xii) Control for retrenchment during times of economic crisis, particularly for women.

### **B. Social Development of Malaysian Indian Women Within The Household.**

Gender relations influence the economic and social positions of Indian women in very different ways when compared with men. Consequently women face a whole set of problems unique to them, retarding their social development within the household. One of the most basic problem encountered by Indian women as with other women is that they are involved in two kinds of employment, one paid and the other unpaid. They work both in the household and in their place of formal employment. They are often the first to wake up and the last to go to bed at night. 90 per cent of women are solely responsible for all household activities. Their household duties include cooking, washing clothes, marketing, child-care and housekeeping. These activities are fairly obvious, but are often taken for granted because no wages are paid for them. In effect, it means that there is no monetary value placed on these household chores, which are assumed to be the obligatory duties of women. Add to this the burden of child-bearing and often nurturing a large number of children. As a result of this many women encounter health problems, lower nutritional levels, depression and general fatigue. Thus at no cost at all women provide the labour necessary to reproduce and maintain a steady supply of labour for the formal employment market. Yet *the work which women do in the households is not valued socially* compared to work in the formal job market, for which a wage is paid.

Gender attitudes deeply influence role perceptions. One of the crucial problems is the extent to which these traditional role perceptions and orientations of both women and men negatively influence their participation in society. Women have been strongly influenced by male attitudes. In traditional society, it is the men who have been in control right through the ages. Through that process, male dominance and power has been very firmly rooted in the minds of people. Women have long been perceived as the 'weaker sex'. This ideology has become established in the very thinking of women themselves. Many women think of themselves as inferior to men. Thus, there is great dependence on fathers, brothers, husbands and sons. Without such figures to "lean on", women feel insecure and unable to cope, especially emotionally and intellectually. Thus, the institutions of marriage and the family have become support systems for women and the propagation of

children. As such, the roles of women have been largely confined to the household.

With the entry of women into wage labour, traditional relations and values have begun to change. For women, this new economic role has broken some barriers. These women now have new power, which comes from their *earning capacity*. To some extent, they too can control and affect the condition of their households. Secondly, they now have a dimension other than the household to contend with. This *independence* has brought a new sense of *self-worth* and *self-confidence*. As such, women workers are indeed bolder and *more assertive* compared to their traditional sisters.

However, familial roles are still dominant, while their economic significance is underplayed. Even though women earn wages, these wages are strongly controlled by their husbands, who are still heads of households. The pressures on these women are greater because they now have to exert so much more to keep their *household* and *jobs* running smoothly. Physically and emotionally, these women are pushed to extremes. *Alcoholism* and *wife battering* are still common. Decision making and ultimate authority in most matters still rests largely in the hands of the men, except for a small percentage of woman-headed families. Even now, men are not quite reconciled to women working outside the home, though they want it for economic reasons. This being the case, their acceptance of female equality and decision making rights is even more difficult.

“Whether on the work front or in the home, the women worker is confronted by a system of wage rates and by a division of labour that discriminates against her, by the man’s claim to manage the household’s financial affairs and by a system of indebtedness for which she is never herself directly responsible. And yet, in almost all cases, she is the one who suffers most. Her wages are lower, she continues working long hours even when the children are full time workers, she is the one who suffers from lower nutritional levels, she suffers the loss of jewellery and dowry to pay off debts that her husband has accumulated, and she suffers the violence when the husband objects to her protests about what she endures”. (Kurian, 1982:96).

There are no easy solutions to overcoming these gender based problems in the household. Gender biases are deeply embedded in the attitudes of both Indian men and women. Nevertheless, within those existing constraints, some suggestions for social development of Indian women within the household, can be forwarded to alleviate to some extent, these problems. These suggestions are as follows.



- (i) Specific orientation programmes for Indian men and women to break down gender-based perceptions within the household.
- (ii) Elevation of the status of household labour by Indian women.
- (iii) Reduce the impact of Tamil films and journalism affecting negatively the portrayal of the position of Indian women.
- (iv) Provision of effective social agencies to offer aid to Indian women, to deal with problems like alcoholism, wife battering, rape and other forms of violence.
- (v) Encourage Indian women to break free from patterns of oppression, to become independent and to think for themselves.
- (vi) Encourage Indian women to become economically independent, through acquiring new skills, jobs and other income generating activities.
- (vii) Encourage Indian women to become aware of their basic social and legal rights in society.
- (viii) Encourage discussions among Indian women on how to improve their own social situation.

### **C. Social Development of Malaysian Indian Women Within the Community And Society**

Except for a small percentage of educated Indian middle-class women, the majority do not participate as actively as men in events outside the home, like in social organizations, politics and labour unions. Their participation is always hindered by male dominance in these organizations, such that the roles of women are secondary. Furthermore, with their other responsibilities, women have little time or energy left to spare to participate actively in these movements. As a result Indian women have been marginalized from the larger decision making process. It is absolutely essential for Indian women to start making the necessary changes to increase their participation in these organizations. It is through these organizations that larger changes in the position of Indian women can be instituted. Women must also become key decision makers within these societal organizations. These opportunities will only arise if men take women more seriously and women themselves have the courage to transcend the traditional constraints on them in society. To achieve the social development of Indian women within the community and society, the following measures are essential:

- (i) Some form of arrangements have to be made for child-care and management of household duties.
- (ii) Indian women themselves have to make an effort to redefine and broaden their roles.
- (iii) Equality of opportunities must be emphasized seriously in all these organizations for women and men, particularly in political parties and trade unions.
- (iv) It is crucial to increase the percentage of participation of Indian women in KEMAS, RISDA, FELDA and other such programmes.
- (v) It is crucial to increase the percentage of participation of Indian women in youth camps, courses, cultural programmes and organizations.
- (vi) Participation of Indian female youth must increase in training centres, farm youth programmes, national youth cooperative movement, youth corps, national youth consultative council etc.
- (vii) Participation of Indian women in sports and sports training programmes should increase.
- (ix) Efforts must be made to break the general gender bias and the monopoly of male decision making in society.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The preceding discussion outlines the main strategies for *social development* that should be adopted by Indian women in employment, in the household and in society. There are many other sub-strategies that can be forwarded, related to these major strategies. It is essential to understand that *education* is also a crucial channel for attaining social development of Indian women. This paper has attempted to highlight that the concept of social development is indeed a broad one and is not necessarily confined to the Malaysia Plan definitions. Social development of Indian women in essence relates to *equal opportunities, in all spheres of life, higher status awareness of the basic rights and greater self-esteem*. Much of this can be achieved through better education and employment opportunities. It must be clearly stated here that social development is not necessarily the monopoly of upper class or middle class women. Any Indian woman who is aware of her basic rights, opportunities and self-esteem has indeed achieved social development. However only a very small percentage of Indian women in Malaysia truly reflect social development.

**References**

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