

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

The ideals of democracy are very far from destination, especially for women in India. Women play a marginal role in politics. Their political participation is almost not visible. But the importance of women's political participation has been increased in all corners of the world. In any country women constitute nearly half percent of the total population, but if it has to adopt a democratic system, it cannot run successfully with half of the population. It will become a crippled democracy. So, a democratic government is impossible without their participation and to empower them socially, economically and politically, their decision-making capabilities are necessary. Moreover, women have various problems, demands and aspirations which cannot be aptly expressed by men. The various problem issues of the people, such as, education, employment, health and nutrition besides foreign policies, relationships with other countries, issues of war and peace, science and technology, protection of the environment do need a women's angle, as they will affect them too in a particular manner. But the world scenario gives us a gloomy picture barring a couple of exceptions, such as, most of the Parliaments have ninety three percent male representatives and just only seven percent are women. The importance of increasing women's participation in Politics had been restated in the World Congress of Women at Beijing in 1995 and in its "Platform of Action" the ways and means had been recommended to increase "space for and visibility" of women in political institutions and processes. This is the most important first step towards women's empowerment. The Women's Reservation Bill in legislatures has shown some light at the end of the dark tunnel. Merely lamenting upon the state would not lead us anywhere. The movement for creating adequate space for women in the process of decision-making, right from within the home to the state and national legislature is required to be taken to its logical end. This article shows the need and imperatives towards enhancing women's participation in politics. An attempt has also been made to glance into the history of women's participation in politics.

KEYWORDS: *Women, Participation in Politics, Decision Making, Democratic Society*

INTRODUCTION

Politics is the process by which people in groups make decisions. It consists of social relations relating to authority or power, and refers to the rules and regulation of a political unit, and to the tactics used to formulate and apply policy. These units have both men and women, but men are always dominated in the field.

Jean Jacques Rousseau had advocated the idea of women's exclusion from politics in 1762. The American Declaration of Independence had also denied the right of equal political participation of women. But afterwards many thinkers like J.S. Mill had advocated gender equality in every field including politics. In post-World War II, the sensitivity

about equality of sexes gained ground. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights also had highlighted equality between men and women. But women are still marginalized in political field and are sufferers of masculine prejudices towards their participation in politics.

View in Indian Context

There is a strong relationship between the status of women and their role in politics. The Indian civilization has already produced many great women ranging from *Brahma vadinis* (lady Rishi) to stateswomen, from model wife to combatant queen. The Hindu mythology shows that during the early Vedic period the status of Hindu women was praiseworthy. In this period, women had enjoyed sufficient freedom. But during the post-Vedic period, they were losing their status in society. They had lost their independence and became a subject of protection. Manu stated that a woman should be set aside day and night in subordination by the males of the family. The woman has to be protected by her father in childhood, by her husband in young age and by the sons in old age. He did not treat women equally with man. He considered women by nature as more emotional and less rational than men. Man was responsible for hard work, earning the bread in a family and women for household duties. The strict tradition of caste had toughened these notions.

The socio-economic status of a Hindu woman was further lowered in the Mughal period. The social evils like the purdah system, child marriage, lack of education, early marriage, unemployment, absence of property rights came into force. Economic dependence made a Hindu woman socially backward. Various incidents of female infanticide and custom of sati were witnessed. Thus, women in this period were deprived.

In the British period, legislation had brought considerable modifications in the structure of society and various reforms were initiated for the welfare of the status of women. In the nineteenth century a variety of socio-religious reforms were undertaken on issues related to women. A nationalistic movement had been emerged by the end of the century. This movement was for achieving freedom from British rule. This struggle for freedom marked the beginning of a political awaking among women in India (Evrette, 1979).

The first Indian National Congress was founded in 1889 and its first meeting was started by ten women only. And then afterwards women started attending meetings regularly. Gandhiji, as a political leader, had brought thousands of women out of their homes to join the freedom struggle. Under his leadership many women had joined the satyagraha movement and many went to prisons willingly. The non-cooperation movement started in 1921 and gave a forward kick to the participation of women in politics. A large number of women came into public in Gandhi's civil disobedience movement and *Dandi yatra* (March) campaign. This helped the traditional household women to come forward as a powerful mechanism of political action. They demanded for equal right of representation in Indian provincial legislature. This demand was first denied by the British government but finally came through in 1935. After attaining freedom in 1947, our Constitution had guaranteed equality before law and equal protection of law, prohibiting discrimination on the ground of sex. It had also empowered the state to make special provisions for women and children, and to provide for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief (Yogendra, N *et al*, 2005).

Now, in India, women are holding important political and administrative positions, like president, prime minister, governors, chief ministers, and ministers in cabinet and state governments, presiding officers of legislative bodies, judges of high courts and secretaries to the Government of India, and so on. So, at present, India figures like the first few states in the world to have a woman as head of the government and head of the state. Indian women got the right to equal political

participation, including their right to vote, much earlier than most of the Western countries. In the regional political scenario there are few women like Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh, Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu or Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal have become prominent centers of power in politics in their respective states. But it should be kept in mind that these women entered politics and rose to glory because of their proximity to male leaders. In India accepting a few women in politics is still a male bastion. The Government of India made effort to improve the socio-economic status of women through its five year plans. The Ninth Five Year Plan commits to “empower women through creating an enabling environment where women can freely exercise their rights both within and outside their homes, as equal partners along with men”.

An Act of Parliament in 1990 had set up the National Commission for Women to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. In 1993, the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India have provided reservation of seats for women in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities. This has brought over a million women into panchayats and urban local bodies (Panda, 2001), has laid a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels. In 1987-92, fourteen thousand women of Karnataka had been enjoying its development councils. In 1991, twenty two thousand women of Orissa were elected to panchayats. In Kerala thirty percent of seats were reserved for women. Recently, there was an increase in the percentage of elected women to local government bodies (Sen. S, 2000). However, still our Parliament is a man’s world. Preventing women from acquiring their own leadership and obstructing them from policy-making decisions is simply an extension of the gender subjugation. Only women in positions of power can inspire more women to take up and overcome these paths (Gupta V, 2005). It is difficult for any household women to climb up the political ladder. There are several women who are holding key positions at various political levels, but their political participations are not encouraging. Women cannot still exercise their rights and enjoy liberties. So for this reason their presence is scarcely felt when all the important decisions for the countries or for women welfare are made.

The Issues of Women’s Development in Politics

In the traditional societies, women’s political participation was the privilege of a few. The participation of women in political activities and various programmes is of recent origin in India. Myron Weiner said, “The concept of political participation refers to any voluntary action, successful or unsuccessful, organized or unorganized, episodic or continuous, employing legitimate or illegitimate methods, intended to influence the choice of public policies, the administration of public affairs, or the choice of political leaders at any level of Government, local or national”. Women are now still fighting against traditions and discriminations that hindered their political rights.

The Following Indicators Were Selected for Showing The Actual Interest and Extent of Participation of the Women in Politics

- Behavior of voting
- Consultation regarding the casting of vote
- Participation in canvassing, political meetings and agitations
- View on thirty three percent reservation for women
- Membership in any political party or association
- Attitude towards increased women’s political participation

- **Behavior of Voting**

Voting is the most important act of political participation. In any democracy women voters constitute an important component. But till today, women voters were not taken seriously. Illiteracy, preoccupation with household duties, looking after children, voting place far from their house were some of the reasons for low participation of women in voting. However, the increased awareness among women voters about their rights is changing the political scenario. Various schemes are also announced for encouraging women voters.

Voting power among women reflect the status of women in our democratic society. The right to vote was granted to every adult citizen of India irrespective of sex from the time the Constitution became effective; and the first free election were held in politically free India. Voting is regarded as the basic means by which all citizens are assimilated in the political process. Almost all women participate in voting now, and this is a significant change compared to the traditional days. They are also aware that each vote is very important, as it decides the destiny of a party; so everyone should vote. Some women, whose names are not included in the voter list, are eager to add their names in the voter list and become a voter.

- **Consultation Regarding the Casting of Vote**

A woman rarely exercises independent judgment in social matters. The woman willingly or unwillingly reacts to the actions and directions of their male figure in the family. The location and distance of the polling booth from the house and the political climate around the polling booth are the main factors that obstruct the females to exercise their voting rights. She is even ruled by the male person in the family about whom or which party to vote. She cannot exercise her choice due to her submissive character, socio-economic dependence, and lack of knowledge in decision making. But now majority of the women exercised their independent decision in casting their votes. It has been recorded that almost all women have their own independent judgments for voting which shows that women have become politically aware. This is a remarkable change compared to the traditional years. Only some women listen to their husbands, male friends or relatives about casting their votes.

- **Participation in Campaigning**

A rigid social system and mass illiteracy among majority of women had interrupted them from effective participation in the political life of the country in traditional India. Their traditional role only demanded full attention to the home, husband, children and family. Their role was to be submissive and docile. The social environment was not favorable for political participation.

However, political awareness has been increasing among the women with the opportunities in education and employment and removal of legal disabilities. The technique of personal contact with the voters through canvassing, meetings, holding agitations for demands imparts a personal touch and is more effective. Various activities are included in campaign activities, such as, persuading others how to vote, actively working for a party or a candidate, attending political meeting or rally, contributing money to a party or candidate, and becoming member of political clubs.

Election meetings are the main means for approaching and informing the voters about the party, its programmes, its symbol and the candidate. Door-to-door canvassing on behalf of any candidate or party is also an indicator of commitment of the electorate. It may be that the voting turnout was good, but the interest of women and their involvement in campaign activities were low. The reasons for non-participation of women in political campaigning are - the meetings

were held in towns where there was no proper transport facility, the meetings were mostly held at night, which was not convenient for women, the social taboos on the movement of women, and also lack of individual incentive. But now there is a slight degree of exposure of women voters to campaigning. They take part in canvassing, distribute slips, pamphlets during election, shout slogans, take part in “padyatras”, convince others to join and support their candidates, create awareness among the people and sought their support. They also arrange meetings during elections to create awareness, and give knowledge to the people about their rights, take part in agitations to show their support to their leader, to press for their demands and to bring a change in society. As a whole, woman voters are increasing in number, though they are still traditional in domestic responsibilities, restrictions imposed by the family members and lacks of interest in their path of participation.

- **View on Thirty Three Percent Reservation for Women**

The position of women in society was very unsatisfactory. The government has concentrated on various policies for women and tried to give them a place of dignity, equality and opportunity in a protected legal framework. Several acts, such as, the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, and so on were imposed to improve their position in society. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have enforced only thirty three percent reservation for women in local government, and there is also demand for such reservation for women at parliamentary and assembly levels. But still women’s position in India is not satisfactory, due to underrepresentation of women in politics. There are women in politics as ‘proxies’, which means they contest from a ward which is reserved for women and all the decisions are taken by the male members of the family. Political parties are itself not willing to give tickets to women candidates. So, some women demand more tickets for contesting elections and reservation of seats for them.

Women are in favor of their thirty three percent reservations in legislative bodies. They are oppressed and suppressed even today, so to improve their status, women want to participate at the decision making levels. They think that this will be possible through reservations, as parties will be forced to put up women candidates and it will be easier for women to fight elections. A woman can understand women’s problems well. Reservation bill is a means for upliftment, empowerment and development of women. Some women think that there should not be thirty three percent reservations in legislative bodies for women. As women have proved their abilities in other fields, they should also prove themselves in the field of politics without any reservations. They think that by asking reservation, women are proving their weakness and inferiority. They also think that women, who were elected through reservation in the “panchayat”, act just like dolls taking orders only from the male members or “sarpanchs”. Moreover, it is the job of the government to change the mind of people regarding politics.

- **Membership in any Association or Political Party**

Women have been regarded as the undeveloped section in Indian society. They are only a unit of the family. But due to the various socio-political processes since the early twentieth century, the woman has become a significant unit of the society. She has now become a leader, a social figure and an important instrument of social change. Their participation in community life is the measure of social change in India.

Women are victims of subjugation and aggression in any society. This has led to a number of organizations, which are working on multiple problems of women like violence, poverty, health, dowry deaths and so on. Memberships to organizations or associations indicate one's social participation, and membership or identification with a political party indicates a person's political thinking and beliefs.

There are various associations such as mahila mandals", "bhajan mandals", "bal sansthas", labour unions, doctor's associations, and so on. These associations work for the economic upliftment of women. Some associations are involved in religious activities, and welfare of children and poor. These associations help by collecting funds, teaching and guiding the poor children, counseling the women, telling them about the legalities in case of a problem, arranging lectures on health-related topics, organizing free health check-ups, "satsangs" and visits to religious places. Some women also helped their parties by organizing meetings, campaigning and creating political awareness among the people. Thus, it may be concluded that women's participation in organizations is very limited. The tradition and family commitments still rule out women to come forward to their social life.

- **Attitude Towards Increased Women's Participation in Politics**

Women have to look upon household activities more and the role of mother, wife and daughter are the natural roles for them in patriarchal society. In these roles, most of their works are not recognized and this reduces women's wider participation in the economic, political or religious fields.

But, at present, the country has been witnessing women in the socio-economic and decision-making process of the government. It is believed that if women come into power, the entire political system would be transformed. The increased participation of women in politics can bring qualitative changes in administration. If more women participate in politics, then more women's problems can be solved, the status of women can be raised and developed faster, which is a significant change. But it is doubtful about their success due to the traditional values on one hand, and due to increasing corruption, criminalization and muscle power in politics on the other hand.

Strategies for Strengthening Women's Participation in Politics

The participation and decision-making of women in politics is mainly influenced by the actions of the political parties. The quotas and reservations are the first step in increasing women's participation in the political world (UNIFEM, 2005). The following are the few strategic actions:

- **Creating and Strengthening National Machineries and Other Governmental Bodies:**

Everyone has the right to take part in the Government of their country according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The empowerment and freedom of women and the enhancement of women's social, economic and political status is essential for the success of both transparent and accountable government and sustainable development in all areas of their life. Equal participation of women and men in decision-making will achieve a balance, which is needed to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning. Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for democracy but also a necessary condition for women's interests. So, women's equal participation in political life plays a fundamental role for the advancement of women. Without their active participation and incorporation at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be attained.

The Beijing Platform for Action is a program for women's empowerment. Its goal is to implement the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the advancement of women and to remove all the obstacles regarding women's active participation in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making spheres of public and private life. So, the principle of common power and responsibility must be established between men and women at home, in the workplace, and in national and international communities. Equality between men and women is a matter of human rights and social justice. It is an essential and fundamental requirement for equality, peace, and sustainable development of a society. It is also necessary for society to meet the different challenges of the twenty-first century.

About six decades ago India had started its institutional interventions for women. Several agencies have been set up to work with women, such as, the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD) within the Ministry of Human Resources, Development of the Government of India, and the National Commission for Women (NCW) in 1992. The objective of the National Commission for Women is to represent the rights of women in India and to provide a voice for their issues and concerns. It is “to examine legal safeguards provided by the Constitution, recommend measures for their effective implementation and improvement, take *suo moto* notice of abuses of women’s rights and correct these conditions in collaboration with the appropriate authorities”. The issues of their campaigns include dowry, politics, religion, equal representation for women in jobs, exploitation of women for labor, police abuses against women. State level commissions for women, Crimes against women cells, Legal-aid cells and all-women police stations have been set up in most states. The National Crimes Records Bureau, and recently district level bureaus have also been instituted for monitoring registered cases of violence against women.

India, in the year 1993, had ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against women (CEDAW). The Preamble of CEDAW states, “Discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity; is an obstacle to the participation of women, on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries; hampers the growth of the prosperity of society and the family and makes more difficult the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and of humanity”.

In India, the goal of the National Policy for Empowerment of Women, 2001 is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. Similarly, the Government of India has launched the National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW) on International Women’s Day in 2010 in order to strengthen the all-round development and welfare of women. The mission has also been named as Mission Purna Shakti, which implies a vision for holistic development and empowerment of women, gender equality and gender justice.

In Bangladesh, the Ministry of Women’s and Children’s Affairs has facilitated the mainstreaming of gender equality in all areas. Bhutan has a National Commission for Women and Children in order to co-ordinate and monitor different gender-related issues. In Maldives the Ministry of Gender, Family Development and Social Security implements its different activities through the Gender Equality Council. The Ministry of Women and Social Welfare in 1995 has deemed a path-breaking initiative. The National Commission for Women, 2002, has also entrusted and promoted welfare for women. A National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women, 2002, also aims at gender equality and social, economic, and political empowerment of women.

Almost all countries have highlighted the lack of resources for institutional machineries looking into women's programmes. National machineries for the advancement of women are hindered by the same prejudices that women always face in society. The Third Beijing Biennial Regional Ministerial Meeting has observed the "marginalization of women's issue." The changing of mindset about women and gender relations is essential for the successful realization of governmental commitments.

- **Incorporate Gender Perspectives in Legislation, Public Policies, Programmes and Projects:**

Various international commitments made through the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), CEDAW, and other instruments, have been seen across South Asia. The recent development at gender budgeting exercise in most countries in South Asia intends to highlight the existing biasness and advise different ways for promoting equality. Gender budgeting is not a separate budget for women, but it is an analysis of the government budget which shows its gender-differentiated impacts. It also gives better transformation of policy commitments into resource commitments. A gender sensitive budget is one that improves the gender balance in outcomes and more effectiveness in targeting of expenditures. It is regarded as one of the most recent and effective tools for gender mainstreaming. Governments allocate budgets for a certain purpose, but the impact on men and women in the society is not the same. The challenge is to afford budgets and programmes that counter pre-existing social biasness.

- **Generate and Publicize Sex-disaggregated Data and Information for Planning and Assessment:**

A conscious effort is needed to generate information on the situation of men and women from the household level and to ensure realistic inputs to planning and policy making. Sex-disaggregated data is decisive to counter the long-standing issue of women's invisibility.

- **Increase in Women's Participation and Leadership:**

As women are relatively new to politics, capacity building and training in political processes are extremely important. Gender training in Bangladesh is being conducted in the National Institute for Local government for ward commissioners, government official, etc. Various programmes are conducted by NGOs on women's empowerment, gender and development, women's rights, awareness raising and sensitization for political empowerment of citizens, etc. In India, both government and non-governmental organizations conduct capacity building programmes for elected women members. In Kerala, gender training programmes for women in panchayats have been conducted.

CONCLUSIONS

Women's participation in politics is essential for securing women's own destiny and rightful position in society, and for the growth of legitimate and sustainable democracy. This also shows the way for their social and economic empowerment. Their participation in public life can resolve many problems of society. In 1929, Gandhiji had written: "Women is the embodiment of sacrifice and suffering, and her advent into public life should, therefore, result in purifying it, in restraining unbridled ambition and accumulation of property".

Women's participation can clean and bring more transparency in administration. If there is more women representation, then there will be more co-operation, less unnecessary irritants, and develop reciprocity in goodwill and mutual confidence. Equal participation of women can change the political face of the world. Thus, there will be a new vista

of co-operation, amity and growth all over the world. According to Swami Vivekananda, a civilization can be judged by the way it treats its women. If a true democratic and equitable society is to be created, then women from all segments must be given a voice in decisions that can affect their lives and family.

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