

PROBLEM AND CHALLENGES OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

True democracy is a system which in Abraham Lincoln's word is a government of the people, by the people and for the people. While most of the democracies have given a system which has government elected by all the societies, it is debatable whether the government comprises of all the divers section and importantly whether the government works for all the people of the democracy. In this context, the problem of low participation of women is of special concern for democracies and without change that true democracy can never be achieved. Women's participation in decision-making is essential for women's interests to be incorporated into governments. It has been widely experienced that government structure which do not provide for adequate participation of women, often suffer from state intervention which are neither inclusive nor democratic. Including women's especially in local government is an essential step towards creating gender sensitive policies. Since women have different needs and perspective on social and political issues, it is important to involve women in governments to incorporate all of the societal viewpoints in policy and decision making processes.

Keywords:- Democracy, Women, Political Participation, Political Empowerment.



I.INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in politics of any country gives a strong message globally not only in terms of equality and freedom of liberty but also in the space provided for women in the democratic framework of electoral politics. India has one of the strongest laws that provide women a life with full honor and dignity. But the customs, patriarchal set ups and societal norms have always treated them as subordinate to men. They are always taught to be submissive.

Women's participation in politics is still not very impressive. The number of women politicians is small as compared to men. The majority of women are indifferent to politics; this is clear in their low participation in voting, in public demonstrations, and in public debates. Whatever participation there is it is mostly limited to women from the urban elite groups. Some of the studies suggest that women see politics as a power game of the well-to-do. The poorer women are more preoccupied with daily bread issues rather than the broader questions of women's development and national politics.

Sushila Kaushik is of the view that despite these developments, the following can be said about women's participation in politics in India:

1. The extent, nature, and level of Indian women's participation is much greater than in many countries;
2. This participation has been more or less steadily expanding over the years through various elections – as voters, as candidates, and in terms of participation in campaigning, etc.;
3. The gap in turnout between men and women is increasingly narrowing down; and
4. The number of women getting elected to representative bodies is steadily increasing.

II.ROLE OF WOMEN IN LOCAL SELF GOVERNMENT BODIES

After the passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act,1992, the representation of women at the grass root level has increased by nearly 50%. Pioneering efforts in this direction were taken by the State of Karnataka in 1983 by offering reservations for women at



the Panchayat level. Several States like Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand have increased women's participation in panchayats to 50%. Women members of Panchayats have done remarkable work in improving the conditions of villagers in matters of healthcare, education, sanitation etc.

III.ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE STATES

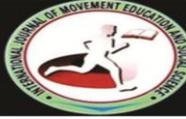
State Assembly elections were held in May 2011 for four States and it gave us two female Chief Ministers i.e. Mamta Banerjee became Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jayalalitha became Chief Minister of Tamilnadu. Mayawati is another strong woman leader of Uttar Pradesh. At the age of 39, in 1995 Mayawati became the youngest politician to be elected as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and the first Dalit woman Chief Minister of any State in India. In addition Sheila Dixit became the Chief Minister of Union Territory of Delhi for the third consecutive term in 2009.

IV.RAJYA SABHA

Similarly in the Rajya Sabha in 1952, the number of women members was merely 15 constituting 6.94 percent of the membership of house. Over the years the percentage of women has increased and now, out of 242 members, 23 are women constituting 9.50 percent of the house,. In Rajya-Sabha, the representation of women has never crossed 12 percent.

V.LOK SABHA

Even six decades after independence, the representation of women in Lok Sabha do not present an impressive picture. It has not crossed 10 per cent in First Lok-Sabha there were only 22 women constituting 4.4 per cent of the House. It increased marginally over the years except in the sixteenth Lok Sabha when the house has only 19 women members. In the thirteenth Lok-Sabha there were 49 women members. However, in the fourteenth Lok-Sabha the strength of women members is 51.



VI.STATE LEGISLATION

Women representation in state legislatures has been equally dismal. At present the average percentage of elected women in state assemblies is 6.94 percent, the highest being 14.44 percent in Haryana and the lowest 1.34 percent in Karnataka. States like Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and union Territory of Puducherry have no representation of women in their Assemblies. It is unfortunate that in India after 58 years of the working of the constitution, Women are still fighting for their empowerment; women's representation in parliament is merely 8 percent. It is not surprising that the global gender gap report 2007 of UNDP had placed India at a disappointing rank of 114 out of 128 countries based on indicators, among other of political empowerment.

VII.THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN POLITICS

A new dimension of women in politics emerged in recent years all over the world. More and more women have now been entering into politics. Conventional politics reflected male concerns and hence women were notably absent in politics. Welfare policies had been constructed and reinforced women's traditional position as wives and mothers. Women have struggled over issues affecting them, especially their rights to property and vote in the 19th century and to abortion, equal pay and nursery provision in the 20th century.

In India, reform movements before and after independence has helped women to gain some power in politics also. After independence they have achieved an unprecedented political break-through with the reservation of seats for them in panchayats and other public bodies. It is heartening to note that Indian women were among the earliest to get their political rights (right to vote) without any political movement like in die United States and many Western countries. They were among the foremost to take active part in politics even in pre-independence times.



Indian women have a distinction to become UNO Secretary (Vijay laxmi Pandit), Prime Minister (Indira Gandhi), Chief Minister (Sucheta Kriplani, Jayalalitha, Uma Bharati, Mayawati and Vasundhara Raje) and even President (Pratibha Patil). By becoming Pradhan or a ward member in a Gram Panchayat or any other civic body, or a member of State Assembly or Parliament, it augments respect within the family as well as in the community at large besides increasing their self-esteem, confidence and decision-making ability. If we take the women's participation in politics as one of the measure-ments of their emancipation, we find at present their number is very low in comparison to men in State Assemblies and Parliament. It is about 11 per cent only (26 women in upper house—Rajya Sabha consisting of 245 members and 59 women in lower house—Lok Sabha consisting of 543 members. There are only 8 women ministers out of total 75 in the government of Dr Manmohan Singh). In Sweden 45 per cent seats are occupied by women in parliament. So far as the administration is concerned, there are only 592 women IAS officers out of 4,671 officers. The demand for special concessions and privileges along with the reservation of posts in assemblies and parliament (the bill is pending for the last more than ten years) and other civic institutions are a few steps towards women empowerment in India.

Women have started writing and reading what other women have written. During the last two decades the writings of many women writers (such as Arundhati Roy) have been acclaimed by the institutions of international repute. There are many women in the field of journalism which was previously dominated by men. Now, she blogs and networks using it for the freedom denied so far to voice her angst, express outrage and disapproval, fulfil the need for acceptance and approval.

VIII.CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN

The Constitution of India establishes a parliamentary system of government, and guarantees its citizens the right to be elected, freedom of speech, freedom to assemble and form associations, and vote. The Constitution of India attempts to remove gender inequalities by banning discrimination based on sex and class, prohibiting human trafficking and forced labor, and reserving elected positions for women.



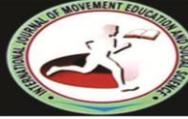
The Government of India directed state and local governments to promote equality by class and gender including equal pay and free legal aid, humane working conditions and maternity relief, rights to work and education, and raising the standard of living. Women were substantially involved in the Indian independence movement in the early 20th century and advocated for independence from Britain. Independence brought gender equality in the form of constitutional rights, but historically women's political participation has remained low.

Women Participation

Voting

The movement for women's suffrage began in the early 1900s in response to a national movement for suffrage, even though vast majority of neither men nor women had a right to vote the British colonial rule before 1947. After Indian independence from Britain, the Indian Constitution in 1950 officially granted women and men suffrage. Prior to universal suffrage, provincial legislatures had granted women the right to vote Madras was the first to grant women's suffrage in 1921, but only to those men and women who owned land property according to British administration's records. Other legislatures followed shortly after, but like Madras, the political rights were granted by British Raj to select few, and the London appointed Governor of each province had the right to over rule and nullify any law enacted by the elected men and women. The rights granted in response to the movement towards suffrage were limited to qualifications of literacy and property ownership, including property ownership of husbands. This excluded vast majority of Indian women and men from voting, because they were poor. This changed in 1950 when universal suffrage was granted to all adult Indian citizens.

In 1950, universal suffrage granted voting rights to all women. This is enshrined in Article 326 in our constitution. India is a parliamentary system with two houses: Lok Sabha (lower house) and Rajya Sabha (upper house). Rates of participation among women in 1962 were 46.63% for Lok Sabha elections and rose to a high in 1984 of 58.60%. Male turnout during that same period was 63.31% in 1962 and 68.18% in 1984.

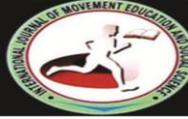


The gap between men and women voters has narrowed over time with a difference of 16.7% in 1962 to 4.4% in 2009. Voter turnout for national elections in the past 50 years has remained stagnant with turnout ranging between 50 and 60%. State elections have seen a growing trend in women's participation, and in some cases women's turnout is exceeding male turnout. Increased turnout of women was reported for the 2012 Vidhan Sabha elections (legislative/state assemblies) with states such as Uttar Pradesh reporting 58.82% to 60.29% turnout. In the 2013 assembly elections, women's overall turnout was reported to be 47.4%, and male turnout was 52.5%. Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Kerala, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Daman and Diu, and Puducherry all reported higher turnouts among women than men in 2013. Increased participation is occurring in both rich and poor states in India. The sex ratio of voters has improved from 715 female voters for every 1,000 male voters in the 1960s to 883 female voters in the 2000s. The Election Commission of India (ECI) has sought to increase voter turnout by cleaning up electoral rolls and removing missing or deceased members. Voter outreach has included door-to-door voter registration, and in 2014 elections, voters will be issued a photo id with polling station information to increase voter turnout.

Increased voter turnout in India is also partially due to the women voters. ECI has sought to encourage voter registration among women and participation through education and outreach on college and university campuses. Growing participation has also been attributed to increased security at polling stations.

2014 Elections

Women turnout during India's 2014 parliamentary general elections was 65.63%, compared to 67.09% turnout for men. In 16 out of 29 states of India, more women voted than men. A total of 260.6 million women exercised their right to vote in April–May 2014 elections for India's parliament.

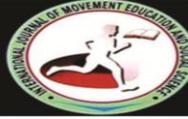


Political Activism

Women's organizations in India first began to emerge in the early 1900s, and later in the 1970s after a period of limited activity from the 1950s to 1970s. One of the earliest women's organizations, Bharat Stree Mahamandal, formed in 1910 and focused on helping women escape oppression from men. Women's associations had traditionally begun with the help of men giving few women access to work and education, while limiting the expansion of traditional gender roles. In 1927, the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) was formed to advocate for women's education and was helpful in the passage of the Hindu Code of Bills between 1952 and 1960. Women were also active in the freedom movement in protesting British colonial rule over Indian holding protests and public meetings in support of independence. The new wave of feminism in the 1970s was in response to gender inequality issues and stagnant development in India.

The Committee on the Status of Women in India released a report in 1974, and had a significant influence in the reemergence of activism towards gender equality. The report highlighted the significant differences between men and women in India, including the disparity in the sex ratio, mortality rates, employment, literacy, and wage discrimination. The report fueled the women's movement by signifying the ongoing discrimination towards women in India. Gender inequality has remained the focus of the women's movement with specific emphasis on issues such as the Uniform Civil Code, Women's Reservation Bill, and sexual violence against women. Women's organizations both informal and formal have developed at the rural, urban, national, and state levels in India. Women's organizations in India address a variety of issues from the environment, poverty, empowerment, and violence against women. One of the most prominent women's organizations in India is the AIWC, which was established in 1927, focusing on empowering and educating Indian women. The AIWC has over 100,000 members and 500 branches in India, and has helped with the passage of the Sarda Act, Maternity Benefit Act, and Hindu Code Bills.

Indian women are significantly involved at the grass roots level of activism. The Chipko movement that arose in the 1970s is one example of success among the women's movement in India, as women protested the deforestation in Uttarakhand leading to the protection of the



region. Since the Indian independence, women's organizations have focused on issues of violence towards women. Women's movements have focused on rape, female mortality rates, female foeticide, dowry deaths, sati, and domestic abuse. Tragedies such as the Mathura rape case in 1972, the dowry death of Tarvinder Kaur in 1979, the death of Roop Kanwar by practice of sati in 1987, the gang rape of Bhanwari Devi in 1992, and the New Delhi gang rape case in 2012, have kept the movement focused on rape and given rise to many women's organizations at the local and national level.

Challenges to women's participation

The level and forms of women's participation in politics is largely shaped by cultural and societal barriers in the form of violence, discrimination and illiteracy.

Sexual Violence

Martha Nussbaum highlighted a significant barrier to women's capability of participating in politics to be the threat of violence. Sexual violence in India is exacerbated by issues of education and marriage. Women are sexually abused. Child marriage, domestic violence and low literacy rates have lowered Indian women's economic opportunities and contributed to sexual violence in India. A 2011 study found, "24% of Indian men have committed sexual violence at some point in their lives, 20% have forced their partners to have sex with them...38% of men admitting they had physically abused their partners." Widespread sexual violence is attributed to the fact that violence within marriage is not against the law, and sexual violence goes largely unpunished. Martha C. Nussbaum states that "In the larger society, violence and the threat of violence affects many women's ability to participate actively in many forms of social and political relationship, to speak in public, to be recognized as dignified beings whose worth is equal to that of others." Self-confidence is likely to increase participation among Indian women, specifically in running for election.



Discrimination

Although the Constitution of India removed gender inequalities among caste and gender, discrimination continues to be a widespread barrier to women's political participation. A 2012 study of 3,000 Indian women found the barriers in participation, specifically in running for political office, in the form of illiteracy, work burdens within the household and discriminatory attitudes towards women as leaders.

Discriminatory attitudes manifest in the limitations presented to Indian women including low access to information and resources. Women rely on receiving information from family or village members, typically men. Women also lack leadership experience due to the fact they are burdened with household duties. The burden of household duties is a significant reason why many Indian women do not participate. Unlike men, there are fewer opportunities for women to get involved in organizations to gain leadership skills. There is little public space for them as men have dominated the political arena for many years in India.

Illiteracy

India has one of the largest illiterate populations. In January 2014, the United Nations reported 287 million adults in India are illiterate. Literacy among Indian women is 53.7%, which is much lower than literacy among men reported at 75.3%. Illiteracy limits the ability of women to understand the political system and issues. Problems with exploitation, such as women being left off of voters lists, have been reported as illiteracy limits the ability of women to ensure their political rights are exercised.

Martha C. Nussbaum concerning political participation stated, "Because literacy is connected in general with the ability to move outside the home and to stand on one's own outside of it, it is also connected to the ability of women to meet and collaborate with other women." Studies conducted by Niraja Jayal and Nirmala Buch found women are "persistently mocked and devalued in the panchayats if they are illiterate." Nussbaum also found literacy can play a key role in the signification and independence of women in politics



by giving them access to communications, such as memos and newspapers, they can become better informed on political issues undermined by the threat of domestic and sexual violence.

Socio-economic conditions, such as poverty and illiteracy, prevent the entrance of women into running for public office, and even voting. Inability to understand the rules of Panchayat Raj undermines the self-confidence to participation in public office. Empowerment of Indian women can also occur through “bridging gaps in education, renegotiating gender roles, the gender division of labour and addressing biased attitudes.” Women can also be empowered to participate by family, and when familial support is present they are more likely to run for office.

The Government of India has addressed the issue of empowerment by consolidating all programmes for women under the National Mission of Empowerment of Women (NMEW). The mission of NMEW is to “enhance economic empowerment of girls and women through skill development, micro credit, vocational training and entrepreneurship.” In 2001, the Government of India passed the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women. The policy focuses on “the advancement, development, and empowerment of women.”

Specifically, the policy focuses on ending gender inequality and violence against women. The United Nations has also encouraged empowerment among India women by campaigning to end violence against women in India. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have also tried to empower women focusing on issues of education, violence, and leadership. NGOs working towards women empowerment in India include Sammaan Foundation, Deepalaya, and CARE India.

Overcoming Barriers to Participation

To overcome issues of discrimination and violence, women’s organizations have focused on the empowerment of Indian women. Empowerment is tied to the support of family and



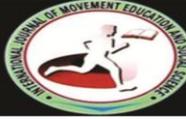
improved status within the household, which is Discrimination is further perpetuated by class. Dalit women, of the lowest caste in India, are continually discriminated against in running for public office. The Government of India requires reservation of seats for Dalits and Scheduled Castes, but women suffer from abuse and discrimination when serving as elected officials. Dalit women experience harassment by being denied information, ignored or silenced in meetings, and in some cases petitioned to be removed from their elected position.

IX.CONCLUSION

It is the need of the hour in a country like India to have equal participation of women in mainstream political activity. Society needs to deconstruct the stereotype of women as limited to household activities only. Overall political parties' environment too is not women friendly, they have to struggle hard and face multi-dimensional issues to create space for them in the party. it is important for all institutions (state, family and community) to respond to women's specific needs such as bridging gaps in education, renegotiating gender roles, the gender division of labor and addressing biased attitudes

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