



WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND CHALLENGES IN INDIAN POLITICS

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INTRODUCTION:

The context of the new global initiative is "Democratic Governance, Women's Rights, and Gender Equality: Building Partnerships for a New Global Research Initiative. The scholar has investigated the key issues and challenges surrounding women's participation in political decision-making, the judiciary and the public sector. Hence, this paper focuses on women's political participation and its challenges.

CONTEXT OF THE DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE:

No theory of Governance would be intelligible unless it is seen in the context of its time. Governance relates to a set of rules, institutions, values and that are involved in the management of the state and society. Governance institutions and processes include political parties, parliaments, government and their interactions with society. Although governance is a generic term which could mean good government or management, the governance values, types of government, the nature of political processes, and the political parties and organizations whose interests are represented and protected. Women's participation in mainstream political activity has important implications for the broader arena of governance in any country.

Liberal democracy is founded on reason, law, and freedom of choice. But the position of different social groups in the social and political space where power is located and practice. The nature of society or state has a decisive impact on the extent and effectiveness of women's political presence and participation. Notions of democracy, governance and the state are often not gender-neutral constructs but result from both historical factors and experiences. The state and its organizational entities reflect the same social forces as other social organizations. It is thus necessary to examine the gender balance in women's participation in the political process, decision making and policy formulation.

The Indian democratic state is committed to the protection of individual rights within the context of citizenship. These rights are not accessible in the public and private spheres at their full potential to all the women in India. There are historical, social and cultural factors that have limited women's capacity and chances to exercise their freedom to participate in the political processes. The evolution of Indian democracy through the 14 general elections so far has reflected a low representation of women in Parliament, State legislatures, political parties and other decision-making bodies.

The underrepresentation of women in the political sphere is inextricably linked with the low and inferior status of women in society in India, especially in the context of the declining sex ratio, increasing violence and crimes against women and their marginalized status in employment, education and health sectors. (Human Development in South Asia:2000). The comparative

position of the gender-related development index (GDI) reveals that among 177 countries, India ranks 113th, indicating its very low gender-equity status. (Human Development Report (HDR) 2007/2008.

OBJECTIVE:

The objectives on which the present study is focused may be specified as follows

- To know the participation of women in politics and awareness
- To study whether women are participating in the decision-making process up to the expected level.
- To analyse the obstacle for participation of women in politics.
- To explore the enabling environment for women's participation in politics and development.

AREA OF STUDY

There is continued inequality and vulnerability of women in all socio-economic, political, education, healthcare, nutrition and legal. Therefore, the study of women's political participation in Indian politics helps an empirical appraisal of the facts like the present-day standing of the women of the study area. The investigator has randomly selected 200 women respondents of different categories and also different communities to represent the whole scenario of the studied area.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

A descriptive method of approach has been follows in this study. The data is chronologically and logically organised with the cause and effects of the relationship to meet the objectives of the study. The historical methodology has been followed to substantiate the core of the study. The study is an attempt to highlight women's political participation in Indian politics and the key issues and challenges are outlined here which are based on the research approach. The study is also an attempt to identify various avenues of capacity-building for women in politics.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

Political participation of women in India

Women in India raised the issue of representation in politics first in 1917. At that time it was a demand for universal adult franchise and political participation. By 1930 women had gained the Right to vote, which initially benefited women from elite families. Women's involvement in struggles for political and civil rights in India were however sought to be linked to nationalist movements in alliance with males against the common foreign enemy. In any case, women's involvement in nationalist struggles changed their lives in that even though they were denied equal opportunities to shape the new state, they gained constitutional and legal rights. But even after the right to vote became a reality for all women, their representation in the parliament, political parties and other decision-making bodies remained low even after independence, and after the Indian Constitution came into force in 1950.(SusheelaKaushik:1993:1996,Veena Mazumdar:1993). A few women no doubt attained positions as members of parliament and state legislatures and as leaders of opposition, etc mostly through family dynasties or male political patronage. However, the percentage of women in legislatures and decision-making positions always remained low. Women do not share the power of decision-making and are not involved in policy-making in Indian democracy in proportion to their numerical strength. Thus there is a gap between the formal idea of women's participation and their meaningful use of power.(Susheela Kaushik:1993). The quest for greater political representation of women is, therefore, still relevant.(Asha Kapur Mehta et al:2001)

Political Rights of Women:

The Indian Constitution guarantees to all women the fundamental right to equality (Article 14) and equal voting rights and political participation for both men and women. As reflected in the Preamble, the Indian Constitution is firmly grounded in the principles of liberty, fraternity, equality and justice and contains several of provisions for the empowerment of women. Women's right to equality and non-

discrimination is defined as justifiable fundamental rights (Article 15) and there is enough room for affirmative action programmes for women. Equality of opportunity in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State is a fundamental right (Article 16). The Directive Principles of State Policy stress the right to an adequate means of livelihood for both men and women equally (Article 39a), equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39d), provision for just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief (Article 39e). Directives for promoting harmony and renouncing practices derogatory to the dignity of women are also provided for in the Indian Constitution. The political rights of women are recognized without any discrimination or distinction and they have the right to participate in decision-making at all levels equally with men. The right to constitutional equality has been supplemented by legal equality by the passage of several Acts through which the traditional inequalities in respect of marriage, divorce and property rights are sought to be eliminated. However, despite these constitutional and legal provisions, the ground reality is that women have not obtained adequate and proportionate representation in the legislative and other decision-making bodies.

Indian women have fewer opportunities for public influence or to enter politics. They also have a lack of opportunities to move within the hierarchies without the patronage of male leaders or mentors. The women's wings of political parties may have given visibility to women in the form of a platform for participation rather than integrating them into central power structures. Women do not have the necessary resources to enter and compete in the contemporary political arena. Thus improved social indicators in development graphs may not automatically ease women's access to political power or improve political participation and representation. They do not necessarily translate into collective gains or sustained political power. Of course, the scope for women's public activism varies across class, caste and region in India. The effectiveness of women's participation also depends on the local configuration of power and cultural environment apart from problems of poverty, illiteracy, lack of economic resources, negative social and legal environments, family and household pressures, male-dominated bureaucracy and politicians that the women face.

Women in India constitute nearly half the population of the country, but they are poorly represented in the various governance and decision-making bodies. The position depicted through the 14 general elections so far reflects a low representation of women in Parliament, State legislatures, political parties and other decision-making bodies. Less than 8% of Parliamentary seats, less than 6% of Cabinet positions, and less than 4% of seats in High Courts and the Supreme Court have been occupied by women. Less than 3% of the administrators and managers are women. The average percentage of women's representation in the Parliament, Assemblies and Council of Ministers taken together has been around 10%. (UNIFEM:2000).

There is certainly a need for women's more effective role in decision-making processes for the democratic and constitutional assurances of equal citizenship and rights in the Indian Constitution to become a reality at the operational level. Citizenship is linked to political participation and representation. Lack of ability and opportunity to participate in the political system implies a lack of full membership in the system. For true equality to become a reality for women, the sharing of power on equal terms with men is essential. But the reality is that women continue to be marginally represented even in areas where the various policies have a direct impact on them. There is still a great gap between constitutional guarantees and the actual representation of women in the political system in India

Besides, Increasing violence, sexual harassment and victimization of women at the ground level in political parties makes participation hazardous. It is difficult for women to establish a foothold without the patronage of powerful men in the party. The decline in women's political participation runs contrary to the trends in other fields, where educated and elite women have broken down most stereotypes and have access to a wide range of professions and occupations (Retrieved Women, Nov 17th 2009). However, Neeta Lal writes that despite India's women becoming politically empowered, "women in India continue to lag on almost all crucial development parameters like education, health and economic participation"(http://ips news. nt/news.asp? idnews' Retrieved Nov 17th 2009).

In the election of 2009, there was an increase in the number of women candidates from 335 in 2004 to 556 in 2009. Fifty-nine of these women were successful, less than 11% of the lower house. But women emerged in key positions to join Sonia Gandhi as the leader of the ruling Congress Party: Pratibha Patil was the country's President, and Meira Kumar was the Speaker in the lower house.

The interviews with women who had stood outlined a gruelling experience. Political participation can be dangerous for women. Respondents referred to cultural beliefs that women exposed to public activities would lead to immoral behaviour. Wives would cheat on men, wives wouldn't grant men the respect that was due, and wives would engage in prostitution if they joined politics. In many cases, husbands forbade their wives to run as they were threatened by the possibility that their wives would interact with other men. There was a serious social stigma on women who left household responsibilities. Those who had been elected to office commented on sexual harassment, verbal abuse, sexual comments, and pressure for sexual favours. Women in positions of power were perceived as loose. One reported being asked how much she costs for sex and where she could meet for a drink. Negative attitudes were held by community members generally and male colleagues in particular. There was resistance, rejection, sabotage, lack of acceptance and opposition from both men and women. There was a widespread perception that women in key leadership slept their way to the top. The cultural attitudes demeaned women leaders with jealousy, mud-slinging, and general discrimination. The media reproduced stereotypes of women as ineffective leaders. Women MPs reiterated that they had to be twice as clean as men, that they had to shout to be heard or to work twice as much as male colleagues to be recognized. One interviewee spoke of gender-unfriendly work environments, unfamiliar language and rules, a lack of training and experience or adequate support. There were other day-to-day obstacles, like a lack of restrooms and childcare facilities.⁵¹

Obstacles to women's political participation:

1. The political obstacles that women face, the following feature prominently:

- The prevalence of the 'masculine model' of political life and elected government bodies;
- Lack of party support, for example, limited financial support for women candidates, limited access to political networks and the more stringent standards and qualifications applied to women;
- Lack of sustained contact and cooperation with other public organizations such as trade (labour) unions and women's groups;
- Lack of access to well-developed education and training systems for women's leadership in general, and for orienting young women towards political life; and
- The nature of the electoral system, which may or may not be favourable to women candidates.

2. The socio-economic obstacles impacting on women's participation in parliament are:

- Illiteracy and limited access to education and choice of professions; and
- The dual burden of domestic tasks and professional obligations.

3. Ideological and Psychological Hindrances (Socio-Cultural)

The ideological and psychological hindrances for women in entering parliament include the following:

- gender ideology, cultural patterns, and predetermined social roles assigned to women and men;
- Women's lack of the confidence to stand for election;
- Women's perception of politics as a 'dirty' game; and
- How women are portrayed in the mass media.

Enabling environment for women's participation in politics and development:

Political Mobilization and Participation Historically many women have been active in the informal political sphere in terms of political mobilization and they have participated in large numbers in political demonstrations and mass agitations as well as in the activities of nationalist and political bodies and organizations. The political mobilization and participation of women have been impressive in the Indian

National Movement, in revolutionary Left movements, anti-price rise stir legislation on rape, against the practice of widow immolation, in the anti-liquor movements and movements against deforestation etc. During the National Movement against colonialism, women were mobilized actively, particularly under Gandhi's leadership and women's organizations within the political parties participated actively in the cause against colonialism for instance in the Civil Disobedience Movements and Salt Satyagraha etc. But once freedom was won, the women's wings were more or less marginalized and assigned areas that primarily dealt with women and children or other 'welfare' activities and women's organizations ended up playing a secondary and supportive role to the male leadership in power. The leaders of such organizations were seldom women with independent political careers unless they were from political families with the backing of male political activists.

Secretary General for the 1995 Beijing United Nations World Conference on Women has consistently advocated not only the need for women to be in parliament, but also the need to change policies, strategies, and outcomes for women. "It is not enough just to open the door to the rooms of power – we have to get inside and rearrange the furniture".⁷ She has consistently questioned to what extent parliamentarians have ensured equal distribution of resources for gender equality and women's empowerment.

But one individual cannot do it all alone. Following the adoption of the multi-party system and an increase in constituencies in India, there have been major efforts by women NGOs to field more women.

To address the limited participation of women in competitive politics and their low representation in decision-making, participants in the workshop developed a five-point action plan, including gender mainstreaming of electoral laws and the overall electoral process; mobilization of women to participate in the elections; capacity building of women candidates at all levels; integration of women's priorities and specific needs in political party programmes; and enhancement of women's role in peacebuilding during the electoral and post-election periods.

Women activists have encouraged women to stand for constituency seats and offered seminars, symposia, forums and workshops to train female aspirants in confidence-building, public speaking, campaign management, fundraising, lobbying and leadership, in addition, they have urged the political parties to nominate more women. Strong party support is crucial because the majority of voters in India vote for parties. Women nominated by small parties have a low probability of winning seats.

The action plan seeks to achieve parity in electoral lists, introduce a 50 per cent quota in all institutions and maintain gender balance in cases of resignation or other changes in post. The strategy aims at streamlining the efforts of different actors, including women's organizations, international organizations, political parties and the government.

Changes in budget allocations are another area for monitoring parliamentary performance

1. Attendance is an output: it says nothing about the quality of contribution while there
2. To what extent does "political participation" measure the simple day-to-day accomplishment of righting wrongs and ensuring access to entitlements, which is an extraordinarily important task, and the place where women representatives find work satisfaction and have some "victories"?

CONCLUSION

It is important to stress that like the equal right to vote, participation and representation in legislative bodies may not in itself be enough for women's political empowerment or to remedy the problems of discrimination faced by women in Indian society. Equality with equity is a goal which may not easily be achieved only by high representation of women in legislatures and other public bodies but has to be buttressed by other supportive measures. Even so, the demand for reservation of seats for women in political bodies to rectify the imbalance has gained strength in India in the light of persisting gender gaps in the various spheres of development. In the absence of any serious political self-correction so far, the demand for reservation of seats in legislatures and party structures has been stressed in India aiming at such an equitable representation.

While the steady increase in the electoral participation and mobilization of women in India has increased the visibility of women in legislative politics this has not happened in the exercise of executive and judicial power due to their lack of presence in the decision-making structures. From this perspective, the important question is what are the benefits of democracy for women? Electoral participation and quotas through affirmative action alone are not enough to result in gender equity.

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