



Women In Temple Of Democracy: A Sociological Analysis Of Political Participation Of Women In India

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Abstract: The making of the Constitution brought the women legal equality. Though the constitutional provisions allowed the women to leave the relative calm of the domestic sphere to enter the male-dominated political sphere, the involvement of women in politics has been low key. This article enumerates the factors which have resulted in a wide chasm between the de jure and de facto status of political participation of women in India. Political participation is a complex phenomenon, which can be comprehended by analyzing several factors. With a purpose of studying this complex situation the article has classified the factors into three categories psychological variable, socio-economic variable and political variable. It concludes that the participation of women is essential as a demand of simple justice as well as a necessary condition for human existence. This can be achieved not just by increasing the numbers but by ensuring that women leaders perceive the problems and effectively resolve the issues. The acceptance of their own equality and confidence in their ability will go a long way in altering the political scenario.

India stands tall among the democracies of the world, an old nation but a comparatively young state, with a constitution that incorporates the best features of various constitutions of the world. The Indian Republic had started its journey with the ideals of liberty, equality and justice, making the Indian women feels secure with promises of survival, equal treatment and gender justice¹. Their dream of being equal citizens however remains unfulfilled even today. The progressive vision of the constitution has proved inadequate in addressing the complexities of gender discrimination.

In the present times there is a growing consciousness to recognize women's autonomy and their capacity to act as full citizens". Their role in the social, political and economic context needs to be recognized in the right earnest and the forces that keep the women away from the main scene need to be countered. Women can be effective change agents and important contributors to the national development. Their status can be co-related to their participating rights and obligations in managing society. The significant indicators of the status of women in any society are political participation, representation and share in

decision-making bodies². The representation of women is considered Important both for normative and practical reasons. Viewed from the normative perspective, the interests of all the citizens should be represented by the political elite. If women are not included in the political process it may result in policies reflecting only the male perspective. Thus, practically, it may lead to the allocation of resources and decisions which may not be in the interest of women³.

In pre-independence India, women had come forward with their demand for voting rights as early as 1917, much before women in other parts of the world secured this right. They bravely fought against colonialism as well as the patriarchal, traditional society. Margaret E. Cousins had advocated, with much enthusiasm, the granting of the same suffrage rights for women as would be granted to their brothers. The cause was furthered by Saraladevi Chaudharani in her proposals before the Montague-Chelmsford team in December 1918. This initiated a long and arduous

struggle of thirty years, which ended on the dawn of independence when women secured the vote. In the modern state the women have become necessarily linked with the state. The rise of the nuclear family and the progressive breakdown of the joint-families have led to a decline in the control over women. The state has entered those spheres which were once controlled by the patriarchal family. The state now regards it as its duty to protect divorced or widowed women, provide employment to them, build women's hostels, make legislation to allow them to claim alimony or seek divorce etc. As a consequence, women have interface with the state more often than before. At the same time, the Indian Constitution provides both men and women with equal protection and rights.

The making of the Indian Constitution brought the women legal equality. Constitutional provisions and legislative securities subsequently led the women to leave the relative calm of private life and enter both elective and appointive public offices in unprecedented numbers. India has the distinction of having had a lady Prime Minister for nearly twenty years and several women Chief Ministers and Governors at the state level. The celebration of the Year of Empowerment of Women, the reservation of 33% seats for women in the Panchayats (local government) and a proposal for a similar reservation in the Parliament all raised hopes for the betterment of women. However, this was only an illusion, which camouflaged reality.

In general, the involvement of women in politics has been low key. They form part of the syndrome of exclusion from political power. Traditionally; they have been volunteers in civic and social community effects, in electoral politics as political wives, party loyalists and voters. In political decision-making their status has been subordinate to that of men. Only a small section of women belonging to or supported by affluent and influential families have managed to enter the political mainstream. With respect to this Anuradha Bhoite has commented on the wide chasm between 'de jure' and 'de facto' perspectives¹⁰. The fundamental right of equality (enshrined in articles 14 to 18) and equal right to vote to men and women bring women at par with men in the legal or 'de jure' sense. They cast their vote and take part in agitational political activities but lag behind in enjoying positions of power and decision making. Thus, in the "de facto" sense they are far below their male counterparts.)

In actuality politics is the functioning of the whole arrangement of institutions and forces which are involved in molding the lives of people by way of decision-making, policies and effective control over the apparatus of the states in getting the same implemented. Politics includes an array of activities. The conventional political activities include voting, campaigning in elections, convincing other persons to vote in a particular manner, attending public meetings distributing party literature, joining a party, contributing money to a party, contesting elections and holding public or party office¹¹. In the present times, the term political participation has been broadened to include all those political acts through which people directly affect the political decision-making process. It includes such activities as strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins,

mass movements, marches, presentation of memoranda as well as violent acts designed to change the political system, or the unconventional political activities¹². Thus, political participation is a complex phenomenon, a dependent variable that depends upon many factors such as the psychological, socio-economic and political, which orient the individual towards or away from political participation.

Psychological Variable

The psychological variable refers to the degree to which citizens are interested in and concerned about politics and public affairs the women in India have generally an apathetic attitude towards politics. They are less likely to take interest in politics, to discuss politics, to attend public meetings and to influence decisions¹³. Unfortunately, in India, politics has been associated with unhealthy competition, display of physical strength, greed struggle for the exercise of authority. In this perspective, women have been socialized to believe that politics is a 'male domain', 'a dirty game'¹⁴. They prefer not to associate themselves with this field.

Besides being a "dirty game" it is also regarded as a coveted male domain. Politics is essentially an art of acquiring and co exercising power-the power to effectively influence the decision-making processes and policies and implementing desired changes¹⁵. This involvement with power and decision-making makes it a protected field. Decisions are meant to be taken by men and followed by women. They are expected to tow the line made by men. They themselves do not enter the "power zone" and are less politically efficacious and less politically interested as compared to men¹⁶. Qualities such as rationality, self-discipline, competition, universality are considered to be important for political participation. These are considered to be in abundance in the males. On the contrary, women are associated with qualities like submissiveness, impulsiveness, indiscipline and irrationality¹⁷. This gender stereotype leads to the marginalization of women in the political arena as they are advised to keep away from politics and play only feminine and non-competitive roles. Campbell (1960) and Robert Lane (1959) have attributed the difference in the participation of men and women to the 'vestigial sex roles'. It is argued that men should tend to political matters while women should take care of the household matters¹⁸. Indian culture assigns the women the responsibility of primarily parenting and nurturing. They accordingly, develop a psychological make-up and choose the role of 'care-giver' and prefer to confine themselves to the private sphere i.e. home. This private and public dichotomy has resulted in women being marginalized in all spheres of activity that can be social, economic and more specifically political¹⁹. Work outside the home has to be done by the women in addition to the household chores for which she has been socialized to believe that she alone is responsible. This results in excessively long working hours²⁰ and acts as a disincentive for women to take on time-consuming political work.

Family and child-care responsibilities lead to role conflicts during the youth. The women who are keen on pursuing a carrier in politics enter the political sphere at a later age when they have fulfilled their responsibilities towards the family. However, this creates a greater problem for them as they have to devote more energy and struggle hard in order to compete with the men who have made an early start²¹. Thus, political equality can only be achieved if the socialization process emphasizes that the primary responsibility of child-care home-making are not those of the women, there-by altering the sex-role stereo-type. The

women should not be let to believe that political activity is inappropriate for her. This change in her psyche would definitely affect her interest in politics and public affairs resulting in a change in the level: of political participation of women. Any individual who is concerned about political matters and is surrounded by political conflicts is more likely to be active in politics than the one who is totally occupied in the private life. The stepping out of the women from her household preoccupations would be effective in bringing about a change in her priorities.

Socio-Economic Variable

Socio-economic variables, including age, education, occupation, income, religion, race, family background, residence, etc., greatly condition political participation. All these factors may condition participation differently in different political and cultural contexts, and their effect on participation may not be stable. In general, persons with higher education and higher socio- economic status have easier access to politics than the uneducated and the persons of lower status Further, dominant ethnic and religious groups, people with political family background, settled residents and urban dwellers tend to do better in the political sphere²³.

Along with these general precepts the social environment of the women undoubtedly affects her political participation. The family in India is the most important social influence on the life of women, who are confined (mentally, if not physically) to the home mainly. Her identity and course of life are normally considered to be determined by her father, brother or husband. The limited political training and socialization that takes place for her takes place within the family and home.

Practices such as female seclusion and sex segregation, the relative rigidity of the division of labour, and the notion of the ‘naturalness’ of males’ and females’ work, and many subtle aspects of gender relations all contribute to the shaping of and are themselves shaped by the ideology underlying their practices and behaviour patterns ²⁴. The women are discouraged from participating due to social and familial impediments. Men usually do not encourage women to go out and vote, unless they are particularly interested in securing votes for a candidate of their choice. On the contrary if they believe that the candidate of their choice can win only by male support they do not find it necessary to take their women along while going to vote. Women themselves are also reluctant to go for voting since they have too many household chores .A majority of women work in the unorganized sector as contractual labour or in the private or small scale sector. In these services they are not given leave to cast their vote. Further, repeated pregnancies, lactation, too many siblings to look after and extremely poor health status also act as disincentives ²⁵.

Women lack control on financial resources and families usually shy from supporting them. Women lack legal control over property and effective control on their income. In case they work within the home their work is regarded as “invisible” or “shadow” work and is not considered significant or remunerable. When they work outside the home and get a salary, the husband, father or brother controls the assets. Her position becomes vulnerable due to increasing unemployment and exploitation, in the form of unequal pay for equal work among males and females, overt or covert barriers to entry or to upward mobility of female labour, unequal access to resources etc ²⁷ consequently, she does not have a substantial reserve which she can spend on her campaign.

Apart from these socio-economic problems, women politicians, activists and decision-makers are confronted with character-assassination, threats as well as violence. There are several instances of physical assaults, rape, and murder of women who dared to enter the political sphere. Most often they are ridiculed and discouraged. A political leader, Sharad Yadav once referred to the supporters of the reservation bill as 'parkatis' and told the National Council of Women that, "Mahila vote bhi koi cheez hai? You must be joking." (Is there any such thing as a women vote) 28. In a similar vein a former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Ranganath Mishra advised the women to sit at home and not work outside their domestic sphere 29. These prejudices, stereotyped thinking and social environment prevent equality in participation.

Political Variable

In the political sphere, a wide gender gap is seen in voting as well as contestation. This is circumscribed by many vital factors in the political environment. The nature of the state, its stage of development, mode of production, overall political situation, type of electoral system, etc. are contextual factors that control the participation of common people in politics. The women are more susceptible to these factors 30. It is generally accepted that the implementation of a proportional representation system rather than a plurality-majority system helps women in achieving success. The system is more responsive and attempts to correlate the number of seats won by a political party with the number of votes cast for that party. This system makes use of multi-member constituencies unlike the Indian system for the composition of Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies, where there are single-member constituencies. If the list system is adopted the parties would feel obliged to include women in their lists in order to balance their tickets across genders 31.

This exposure of Indian women to greater insecurity, corruption, and criminalization has resulted in their aversion for the political scene. The political scene in India is dominated by political parties, which are the primary organizations through which citizens contest elections before the elections the parties put forth their principles in their manifestoes, indicating their policy perspectives. The manifestoes of all political parties contain promises of taking up programmes for the welfare of women. These have, however, not been able to bring about a change in the conditions of women. 33 The pre-election manifestoes of major parties - Congress I, Bhartiya Janata Party, CPI (M), Trinamul Congress- had committed their support to reservation of 113 seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislatures by an amendment of the Constitution. However, the bill was met with rejections in 1996 under the Deve Gowda government and in 1998 under the Vajpayee government, after which it was introduced by the 85th Constitutional Amendment Bill in the thirteenth Lok Sabha. It lapsed due to the dissolution of the House 35

A gender gap is witnessed even in contestation. Political parties have always been reluctant to give tickets to women. They prefer to give tickets to the male candidates. The parties are usually against taking a risk of putting up women as candidates because of the social attitudes which disfavor women's entry into politics. Unless it is a reserved seat they prefer that women only support and do not contest. A large number of women try their luck as independent candidates, after being denied a ticket by the parties. They are rarely successful because the entire game of power is operated through parties. An independent candidate stands on a weaker platform. 36 It needs to be remembered that our political system works through political parties if women want to share power; they have to make a place for themselves with the political parties. The experience of over fifty years shows the inability of parties to make a place for the women. Even the presence of women does not result in any significant changes in either the nature of women's functioning or

in the party approach to women and women's issues. It is also possible that at present, the number of women politicians is small. Hence they have to toe the lines of dominating male members to get a greater share of decision making in the future.

It is noted in various countries of the world that women have not been very successful in the political field at the world level only 10% of the parliamentary positions and 6% of the Cabinet ministerial positions are occupied by women. 37 Only a few countries, like Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark have crossed 30% representation of women in the parliament 38 What is disappointing about India is that it has taken a 'backward turn'. It was ahead of western countries in granting the right of voting to women at par with men in 1950. Even before independence we had accepted the importance of women in politics. As far back as in 1917 Mahatma Gandhi had said: "Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of man, and she has the same right to freedom and liberty as he has." 39. Yet we now feel the need to make provision for reservation in order to get the women in the political sphere. The first Lok Sabha had 22 women; the second had 27, while the third had 34. A decline was witnessed in the fourth, (31 members) fifth (22 members), and sixth (19 members) Parliament. The next Lok Sabha showed an increase to 28 members, which was enhanced in 1984 to 44. The consequent parliaments showed fluctuating figures -28 in the ninth, 39 in the tenth, 40 in the eleventh, which rose to 44 in the twelfth, 49 in the thirteenth and 45 in the fourteenth Lok Sabha

A significant aspect of participation is the casting of one's vote. Voting by the citizens leads to the formation of a government, which then takes decisions for all the citizens. It is, however, noticed that though the percentage of women voters has increased, the figures for female voters have always been less by approximately 6%, as compared with men. 42 This increase in the number of voters has led various political parties into paying greater attention to organizing the women and campaigning among them. In the past, such efforts were made only at the time of elections, in the form of certain 'popularity and opportunistic short-term' promises. In accordance with the changed circumstances, the parties have established regular party forums, cells etc. for mobilizing women and seeking their support. 43

The casting of a vote is governed by several forces, both in the case of men and women. The result of the election, therefore, does not in actuality reflect that the winning candidate had the acceptance of a given number of individuals. The individual's preferences are subdued by the choice of elders (especially males) in the family, influential leaders, and caste-persons etc. It is dis noteworthy that the electoral sex-ratio has shown a decline in the number of women voters, though a proportional decline is not seen in the general sex-ratio. There are lesser women than men in India but according to the records of the Election Commission of India the number of women voters is lesser. With female mortality greater than males in the 0-18 years age group the sex-ratio of people above 18 years is better than the general sex-ratio; consequently, the electoral sex-ratio should also be better. This is not seen in practice and over a crore women is missing from the voter's list. The number is greater in states like Assam, Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Rajasthan. 44 These weaknesses of the Indian voting pattern cause deterioration in the quality of Indian democracy.

Though this is largely blamed on illiteracy, the lack of accessibility to the electoral machinery is chiefly due to the cumbersome procedure of voting. At times one has to face several problems to get one's name added to the electoral role. Some of the common problems are lack of proper publicity of the program of revision, inability of women to complete the formalities, indifference of the enumerator or his personal prejudices of caste, religion, sex etc. At times the political parties do not take sufficient interest unless their own supporters are involved 45.

Thus, women remain at the periphery of the power structure. They lack the political consciousness needed to formulate and implement policies in accordance with the aspirations of women. Their presence is a mere 'symbolism' rather than 'real power wielding'. 46 A successful democracy requires a participant society in which power is shared and authoritative decisions are made by representatives of all the citizens. Indian democracy, unfortunately, lacks the effective participation of all its citizens

Conclusion

To strengthen the position of women in society equal participation of men and women is required. This is not only a demand of simple justice or democracy, but a necessary condition for human existence. The entry of women into politics and decision-making structures can change the policies, vision and structure of institutions. They could redefine political priorities, and place new items on the political agenda to address gender specific concerns and provide a new perspective on mainstream political issues. 47 Women have long been overlooked in the process of development. 48 Change can only come; development can only take place when women are given decision-making roles. It is also necessary to overcome the patriarchal orientations. Patriarchy should not be regarded as an 'insurmountable ghost but must be fought back. Education, development of scientific outlook, legal safeguards, enlightenment of men and awareness of their own potential by women are the effective forces in this direction. 49 By strengthening women's leadership, building up their self-confidence and morale and equipping them with information the situation can be changed. It is not just the numbers that count. Success lays in the way the women leaders perceive the problems and effectively resolve the issues. Sensitization of the leaders towards gender issues would go a long way. Simultaneously, massive legal awareness programmes need to be launched for laws in themselves are inadequate until the women are aware of them and implement them to their advantage. However, the most significant change needed is in the perception of women or a 'revolution of consciousness in the minds of women' 50. They should realize that they are legally at par with men and they should not be deprived of any of their rights. Their acceptance of their equality and confidence in their ability would go a long way in altering the political scenario.

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