



ROLE OF WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS: A BRIEF REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Politics' is often defined in very narrow terms as the electoral participation in a democracy. The varied activities that are performed by a person in an elected position or as part of the voters' duty, are defined as political participation. This is because such a participation is expected to be the spring-board of decision-making in the public sphere which in turn, is denoted as power. Politics being a game of power, and power being the deciding factor in moulding relations in society, an individual's role in politics, and the nature and extent of her/his participation is vital to her/his position in, and contribution to society. While the value and impact of women's participation in voting and the pattern of their exercise of this power cannot be underestimated, women's participation, impact and role in other political activities are equally important. These are ongoing activities and are pursued even during the inter-election period; their cumulative effect influences the policies; manifestoes, campaign issues, campaign methods and techniques, and, above all, the choice of candidates by the parties in the electoral fray.



It is, thus, essential to study, apart from the electoral participation of women, their participation in the peasant and working class movements, autonomous women's movements, women's wings/units within political parties and interest groups etc. There are also the spontaneous outbursts and informal struggles of unorganized women etc. One needs to study these in order to really gauge women's political awareness and participation.

KEY WORDS : *Politics , manifestoes, campaign issues, campaign methods.*

INTRODUCTION

'Politics' is often defined in very narrow terms as the electoral participation in a democracy. The varied activities that are performed by a person in an elected position or as part of the voters' duty, are defined as political participation. This is because such a participation is expected to be the spring-board of decision-making in the public sphere which in turn, is denoted as power. Politics being a game of power, and power being the deciding factor in moulding relations in society, an individual's role in politics, and the nature and extent of her/his participation is vital to her/his position in, and contribution to society. While the value and impact of women's participation in voting and the pattern of their exercise of this power cannot be underestimated, women's participation, impact and role in other political activities are equally important. These are ongoing activities and are pursued even during the inter-election period; their cumulative effect influences the policies; manifestoes, campaign issues, campaign methods and techniques, and, above all, the choice of candidates by the parties in the electoral fray.

There are still other spheres which mould women's role and participation in elections as voters and candidates or as ministers and 'decision-makers'. Not merely in the public sphere, but even in the private

realm of family and marriage, women have to often wage silent, and unrecognized battles for survival and development, against invisible cultural stereotyped roles and obvious, deliberate gender discriminations. Such struggles have become part of schooling, employment, political contests etc. While some women are capable of resisting them, many others merely accept them. Similarly, there are many who exercise independent judgement, while perhaps many others seek or perforce subject themselves to others' judgement and advice. Such actions and decisions are not merely 'political' in themselves, but also help mould the attitude and personality of individuals. The family and workplace thus cease to be the citadels of protection or the soil for the development of one's talents, personality and abilities, but end up as a prison inhibiting their growth.

It is, thus, essential to study, apart from the electoral participation of women, their participation in the peasant and working class movements, autonomous women's movements, women's wings/units within political parties and interest groups etc. There are also the spontaneous outbursts and informal struggles of unorganized women etc. One needs to study these in order to really gauge women's political awareness and participation.

In the case of India, as in the case of many developing countries which have recently become independent or gone through revolutionary warfare, women are relatively more 'visible' in high and significant positions. This is because the women who participated in such struggles had broken many socio-cultural obstacles and inhibitions. And while this strength may not have been shared earlier by the common women and while the legacy may have become diluted with the passage of time, its political impact is continuous. In India, women's occupation of positions like Governors and Chief Ministers of States, Ministers and Secretaries of Departments, Ambassadors and Vice-Chancellors even at an early stage, could be attributed to this legacy of the freedom struggle. To a great extent, the adoption of a liberal constitution with equality of sexes, as well as special provisions for women are the result of the massive female participation in that Struggle, thereby focussing attention on their status and condition.

International History of Women's Political Participation: Having a glance at the history of equal participation of women in the political fields in certain countries, it can be observed that in ancient Greece and Republican Rome as well as in the few democracies having emerged in Europe, women were totally excluded from the voting rights by the end of the 18th century. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is a declaration of the rights of women to equality of education and to civil opportunities. Today it is regarded as one of the foundational texts of liberal feminism. However, despite of the extension of voting rights as it took place in the United Kingdom in the year of 1832, all the voting rights were denied to be vested in women folk. Only in the 19th century, on the issue of voting rights of women, began the struggle and especially in Great Britain and the United States. American women were the first at the world level for fighting for their rights to vote. Similarly, women won voting rights in most of the western liberal democracies after their systematic battle with the system. In United Kingdom, the right to vote was granted by the British Government on the basis of wifehood, property and education. It was only at the early years of the 20* century, women got the success in getting right to vote in the national elections in the countries of New Zealand in 1893, Australia in 1902, Finland in the year of 1906 and Norway in 1913. Women had achieved voting rights in some local elections as far as Sweden and United States were concerned. The enfranchisement of the women particularly in the nations of Europe and elsewhere were speeded up during the period of World War I and its aftermath. On August 26, 1920, the 19th Amendment granted the right to vote to American women, is signed into law by Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby. In almost 28 countries, women won the battle of achieving the equal voting rights with men during the period of 1914-1939. In many of these countries, initially women got the right to vote in municipal or other local elections or most likely in the provincial elections; only in the later phase, they were granted the equality right to vote in the national elections. And immediately after the World War II, some more countries like Italy, China etc. jointed this very group. The total number of countries had reached more than 100 in another decade which had

provided its women equal rights to vote partly due to the reason that nearly all such countries had achieved independence after World War II and had granted such rights in favor of women in their Constitutions. In Switzerland, women are provided with the full and equal voting rights in federal and most cantonal elections by 1971 and in 1973 same rights were granted to women in Syria also. However in a number of conservative Arab countries bordering the Persian Gulf, women continue to be denied the equal voting rights. So, in some Muslim countries, participation of the woman in different spheres of civil life was insignificant. She still has no right to vote in these countries. Complete voting rights on equality basis for women were granted in the Constitution of India by its Government in the Year of 1949; in the country of Pakistan, full voting rights were granted in favor of women in the year of 1956 in national elections.

Women in politics

The participation of women in Indian politics can be traced in many ways.

Women's movements - a historical review

The freedom struggle in India is one of the few liberation movements in the world which witnessed a vast participation by women. The extent, nature and method of this participation broadly followed the pattern of the evolution and growth of the Indian National Movement as a whole.

Sixty years of the Movement witnessed the gradual beginning and growth of women's participation. There was the formal, direct and visible participation of women in various activities - like singing, writing, partaking in protests, processions, going to jail etc. and in the more peaceful forms of satyagraha and non-violent, non-co-operation. There were also the more militant and violent methods. Many women even *took* up training in gun carrying. And there was the informal process of participation such as lending support and backing up with various activities which have not always been singled out.

The presence and contribution of these women, however, were recognized by the leaders, particularly during the era of Gandhi's leadership. At the same time, the absence of a separate women's section in the Movement meant that the various organizations pursuing the interests of women had to act on their own; they also served as pressure groups both on the British rule and on the Indian National Movement. Many women served in both, establishing a link between the two. By the beginning of the twentieth century very many women's organizations working specifically on women's issues were born. Women's education, health, training colleges for women, construction of homes for widows, scholarships, medical colleges and short maternity courses for women etc. were some of the issues women's organizations were concerned about. They also recognized quickly that the emancipation of women was inextricably linked to the political freedom of the nation. The various organizations dealing with the multifarious problems and activities of women had to be brought together and amalgamated if women's questions had to be highlighted and women's emancipation achieved. It was with this in view that the All India Women's Conference was created in October 1926. Many women believed that women's rights and issues could not be secured in isolation from nationalist struggle.

Participation in politics

With this legacy of large scale participation in national politics, women in Independent India participated as free and equal citizens. This participation can be analyzed in its various domains.

Participation in electoral politics

The participation of women in the electoral process is an indicator of their political consciousness as well as their aspiration for status enhancement. A quick glance at women's participation in elections over the past three decades and nine General Elections will confirm the initial hopes placed in them. The figures concerning women's formal participation in the electoral process both as actors and objects of attention, bring out a few facts: (i) the extent, nature and level of Indian women's participation is much greater than in

many other countries; (ii) 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.; (iii) the gap in the turnout between the men and women is increasingly narrowing down; (iv) the number of women getting elected to representative bodies is steadily increasing.

Women's participation in the grass-roots democracy

Democracy and development, in order to be successful, need the maximum participation of people at the lowest level. *Panchayat Raj* (democratic decentralization) is an important political innovation and a vital conduit in Independent India, for popular participation in democratic development. It is envisaged not merely as a method of implementation of rural development policies and the dispersal of developmental benefits, but more importantly, as the training ground for the promotion of local initiative, for increasing people's political consciousness, their awareness of their rights, and for their direct participation in self-rule. *Panchayat Raj* being the best and most widespread training ground for the emergence of leadership of India, the question of women's participation becomes vital. With this in view, as early as 1962 when many state governments like Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, initiated Panchayat Raj reorganizations, they especially stipulated the representation of women.

The inclusion of women, by co-option and nomination if necessary, in the elected bodies, it was believed, would lead to their greater participation in the local political processes and thereby promote their development through empowerment. Even though the experiment had not proved totally satisfactory, partly due to the small number of women involved and partly due to a lack of political consciousness, the *Gram Panchayats* and *Mahila Mandals* have been performing their roles moderately and working as a training ground. The whole experiment is considered conducive, in the long run, to the process of democratic decentralization wherein political power can devolve to women.

Trade Union Movements in India

The participation of women in trade unions, however, is far from satisfactory, due partly to the nature of women's work and to the trade unions' ways of functioning. But this is also the result of a strong patriarchal attitude prevalent among the workers and their leaders. Besides trade unions cover mainly the organized sector and much of women's work falls under the unorganized sector.

This is so despite the fact that many women have been active participants in the trade union movement. There are women workers who have evinced a great deal of interest in and shown loyalty to trade union activities. In fact, the first trade union in India (of textile mill workers) was founded by Anusuyaben Sarabhai in Ahmedabad in 1917. She remained its President until her death. The patriarchal attitude of the male workers and their leaders is responsible for (i) poor representation of women in decision-making positions, and (ii) the neglect of issues concerning women. Many male workers view their female counterparts as basically home-makers.

It is only in recent times that the three major trade unions, namely: INTUC, AITUC and CITU have begun paying attention to women workers. At the same time, women workers have started struggling on their own, seeking to fulfill demands that concern them as women. This has not always been successful, but many a time their firmness as well as the support received from active women's groups, have paid dividends. However, even in these movements (except where they are made up exclusively of women members) they have not been able to emerge beyond middle level leadership, despite their commitment and militancy.

Participation in peasant movement in India

Women form the bulk of agricultural labour in India. The history of agrarian movement shows that women had participated in great numbers, even though to many of our historians of peasant movements, their participation had remained invisible. Women participants had fled from home and lived without food and endured all kinds of hardships. During the Avadh movement of 1920-21, women had been mobilized on

a large scale. The Kisan Sabha movements under Sahajananda saw a wide participation of women. They surrounded fields of grain, protested the authorities, and organized the fighting.

The Tebhaga movement (1946-50) in Bengal witnessed the rise of a women's group called 'Nari Bahini'. What motivated them were women's issues such as wife beating and rape by the *tamindm* (landlords). They represented cases of violence and molestation in people's courts. They raised questions of sexual division of labour and control over income. Despite violence, rape and killing, women participated fearlessly to maintain the communication network and shelter the activists.

The Telangana Movement (1946-51) was another peasant struggle in which women participated in guerilla tactics and played leadership roles, facing torture, molestation and repression by the police and Razakars in the process. Women also mobilized themselves against child marriage, concubinage and dowry.

Women Career Politicians

The present section is based on a survey on the political careers of 80 women politicians of India who have held or are currently holding positions in public life at the national, state and local levels. In the Indian context, and particularly for women, the public career of a person depends a great deal on her family background. The process of socialization and politicalization, the nature of the matrimonial home, and above all, socioeconomic factors like religion, caste and class, the nature and level of patriarchy within one's parental as well as a final family, the reactions by way of support, encouragement and restrictions, the readjustment in the domestic and external lives, the reactions from society and religious leaders etc. become additional factors that seem to influence and control women's lives, desires and actions much more than those of men. Hence, the political career of a woman politician has to be traced (unlike that of a man) from personal factors like age, marital status, age of marriage, socialization process etc. to objective factors like family background, socio-economic status and religion, and finally to political background and circumstances.

The Role of Panchayati Raj in Women Political Empowerment

- Article 243 D of the Constitution provides that not less than one-third of the total number of seats in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women including Chairpersons in every Panchayats and such seat may be allotted by rotation to different Constituencies/ Panchayats at each level.
- The 73rd Constitutional Amendment provided for the increased participation of women in the political institutions at the village, taluka and district level. This has enabled several women, who had never been in power and even those illiterate, to enter politics.
- There are 27,82,293 elected representatives in Panchayats out of which 10,42,282 are women which constitute to 37.46 %. In states like Kerala, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh, the number of women elected in panchayats is quite high.
- To further facilitate the process of women's empowerment in the Panchayats, which is, of course, related to greater empowerment of the Panchayats themselves, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj is implementing a scheme of Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Yojana. The Ministry has also initiated the Panchayat Mahila Shakti Abhiyan.
- Karnataka tops the country in the representation of the women in the Panchayati Raj institutions with women winning 43.7 per cent of the seats in gram panchayats, 40.2 per cent in taluk panchayats and 36.4 per cent in zilla panchayats.
- Bringing women into politics through the Panchayat Raj Institutions system (PRI) was an act of positive discrimination. Crucially, PRI has helped to change women's perceptions of themselves. Women have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources, officials and, most of all, by challenging men. PRI has also given many women a greater understanding of the workings of politics, in particular the importance of political parties.
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importance of political parties. PRI has helped to change local government beyond simply increasing the numerical presence of women. There is now a minority of women who are in politics because of their leadership qualities or feminist consciousness.

- Women are also taking action against child marriage and child domestic labour, whilst promoting girl-child education. As with education, women have used their elected authority to address quality health care as a critical issue.

CONCLUSION

The culture, history and religion of India give women an exalted position. Their participation in the freedom struggle and present day democratic politics is quite visible and well cognized. The country's Constitution, under the Fundamental Rights, guarantees equality of sexes and confers on women the same rights as those on men. There are portions wherein it goes even further and provides for special measures to protect women and promote their development. A good deal of social legislation, socio-economic policies and statutory measures have sought to strengthen and implement these objectives. As a result women are increasingly visible today in all spheres of life.

Despite this, the participation of common women in politics or of women playing a role in decision making by occupying seats of political power is very meagre and peripheral. At the best of times, only 8 per cent of the total membership of the Parliament was female. Such a micro-analysis, however, does not speak of the political awareness of the women of India, of the factors for their low participation, the nature of participation or the sectoral distribution of the women who do participate and chalk out for themselves a political career.

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