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Political Representation and Empowerment of Women in India

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Abstract

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights and everybody is entitled to all the rights and freedoms without any distinction of race,gender,colour etc.But it is a matter of ill-luck that women are discriminated in all over the world in all fields.In ancient India women enjoyed the equal position with men in the society but with the passing of time, this equality has gradually disappeared in all the sphere of the society.Hence ,the issue of women's poltical participation and representation has alyas in the backstage and basically the level of representation is very low in India.This paper deals with the women emancipation through its political participation and the empowerment of women to a great extent.

Key words:dignity,representation.poltical participation,discrimination

Introduction: A democratic country can truly be recognised as egalitarian if all its citizens including men and women get equal recognition in the public sphere.It is the political participation that enables a citizen be it men or women ,to express their full potentials in the public sphere. But women around the world find themselves underrepresented in the legislative bodies which cause greater hindrance in realising the full potential of women as equal citizens of a democratic nation. Several factors are responsible for underrepresentation of women in the legislative bodies of the countries across the globe. It may be noted that exclusion of women from elected bodies leads towards denial of the development of the democratic ethos of equality and justice in the public sphere. Therefore adequate measures should be taken to ensure representation that basically reflects the full diversity of societies, which will lead towards organisation of a 'gender-balanced' legislative body. This article tries to focus upon the need of women's participation in the decision-making process to make them the equal partners of the democratic process.

Aims and Objectives:

The main aims and objectives of our study are-

- 1. What are the causes behind the lack of women representation in the political scenario of India*
- 2. This paper tries to find out what are the major obstacles which have played a negative role in the path of women participation in India*

3. This paper also tries to explore the extreme needs of women participation in the electoral politics of India
4. Lastly, what are the ways in order to increase the level of women participation and representation in India

Methodology: This study is both descriptive and analytical. The author is mainly relying on secondary sources. Data are collected from books by prominent writers, scholarly articles and reviews, official sources and so on. No field study or empirical analysis is attempted in this paper.

The Status of Political Participation and Representation of Women in India: A large mass of women in India are kept out of the political arena for various reasons. Women have to listen to the dictates of a male dominated political structure that has not made any serious efforts to organise a gender balanced system. Representation of women in India in the legislature both at the national and state level has remained very low since independence. Though, since independence there has been significant rise in participation of women as voters in the elections, their presence in the elected bodies has remained very low. Our constitution promises to “secure to all its citizens, justice, social, economic and political”, and “equality of status and of opportunity”. But in practice, democratic system in India has not been able to ensure equal political justice to its womenfolk. Though Indian women played a great role in the freedom movement and also in some popular movements in the post independent period, yet politics proved to be very inhospitable terrain for women. No doubt a few seats has been given to women but it has not been in proportion to women’s strength in population. Again women are not entrusted with the key cabinet positions and are often entrusted with certain lower level of positions within the ministry such as Women and Child Welfare, Culture etc.

The following table (Table 1) shows the voting percentage by gender across different lok sabha elections.

Table-1: Voting Percentage By Gender Across Different Lok Sabha Elections

Year	Total	Men	Women	Difference In Turnout
1957	45.4	56.0	38.8	17.2
1962	55.4	63.3	46.6	16.7
1967	61.0	66.7	55.5	11.2
1971	55.2	60.9	49.1	11.8
1977	60.4	65.6	54.9	10.7
1980	56.9	62.1	51.2	10.9
1984	63.6	68.1	58.6	9.5
1989	61.9	66.1	57.3	8.8
1991	56.7	61.5	51.3	10.2
1996	57.9	62.0	53.4	8.6

1998	61.9	65.7	57.6	8.1
1999	59.9	63.9	55.6	8.3
2004	58.0	61.6	53.6	8.0
2009	58.1	61.0	55.8	5.2
2014	66.4	67.1	65.7	1.4
AVERAGE	58.5	63.4	53.6	9.8

Source: Election Commission 1957-2014,

The representation of women in the lower house of parliament can be shown through the following table.

Table-2: Representation of Women in Lok Sabha from 1st to 16th Lok Sabha

Lok Sabha	Total No. of Seats(Elections Held)	No. Of Women Members Who Won	% Of The Total
1 st (1952)	489	22	4.4
2 nd (1957)	494	27	5.4
3 rd (1962)	494	34	6.7
4 th (1967)	523	31	5.9
5 th (1971)	521	22	4.2
6 th (1977)	544	19	3.4
7 th (1980)	544	28	5.1
8 th (1984)	544	44	8.1
9 th (1989)	529	28	5.3
10 th (1991)	509	36	7.0
11 th (1996)	541	40	7.4
12 th (1998)	545	44	8.0
13 th (1999)	543	48	8.8
14 th (2004)	543	45	8.1
15 th (2009)	543	59	10.9
16 th (2014)	543	61	11.2

Source: Election Commission of India

Thus, we have seen from the above discussion that there is urgent need of introducing electoral reforms in India to make legislature gender balanced and to make sure that at every level of electoral politics women can participate actively. Women's participation in electoral process only as voters will not help in the achievement of political empowerment of women. Our democratically elected govt. should pay attention to these issues and act accordingly.

Need of Political Participation of Women in India: In order to acknowledge the true meaning of democracy, it is very essential to consider the role of women in elections or the significance of ensuring equal opportunities to women in a democratic set up as they account for half of the total population. Women should be given equal representation for various reasons. These are –

- 1) As the equal citizens of the democratic country like India women play a key role in the nation building process. Their role in the nation building process can be traced back to the period of freedom movement where they under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi engaged themselves in various activities such as organising meetings, spreading the message of swadeshi and so on. Therefore, keeping in mind the greater contribution of women in the freedom movement, efforts should be made at all levels to ensure political justice to women.
- 2) According to one of the chief architects of Indian constitution B.R. Ambedkar, there are two pre-requisites for successful functioning of democracy. These are a)'the representation of opinion 'and b)'representation of persons' .According to him, Govt. is one of the fields for the exercise of individual capacities ,therefore ,it is in the interest of the people that no person as such should be deprived of the opportunity of actively taking part in the process of govt. Therefore immediate measures should be adopted to make elected bodies gender inclusive.
- 3) It may be noted that many of the crimes that are going on against women in our society today remain unresolved due to male dominated political system which has failed to address gender sensitive issues to a larger extent. Therefore it is the need of the hour to take affirmative actions to ensure women representation in elected bodies so that gender responsive policies can be formulated towards the uplift and advancement of the condition of women in India.
- 4) Ensuring equal political participation of women can enable them to enjoy the freedom of expression .assembly and association and make them aware and vigilant citizens of a democratic country.

Key Determinants of Ensuring Higher Level of Participation of Women in Political Process: In India level of women's participation in the electoral process is generally lower than that of men. The reason behind this may be for the factor that women are socialised differently as far as marriage, motherhood ,employment, property ownership are concerned .Again ,the socio-economic demographics of women and gender specific reasons also determine the level of participation of women in formal politics.

In analysing the factors that determine the level of women's participation in politics reference could be made to the data from the National Election Study(NES)2004 conducted by the Centre For The Study Of Developing Societies (CSDS) and women's electoral participation index created from the NES Data sets.

- 1) **Interest in Politics:** Data collected from the study reflect that one of the key determinants ensuring women's participation in election is their interest in politics .Higher level of interest in politics leads to higher participation of women in politics.
- 2) **Societal Background:** Then, level of women's participation in politics is based on the societal background and the level of liberty and equality enjoyed by them. This is how, women who can decide on their own whom to vote for leads to greater level of participation of women as voters in electoral process than those whose decisions are influenced by family and friends.
- 3) **Location and Region:** _Another important factor that determines women's participation in politics is location or region .Data collected from the NES has shown that women living in the rural areas voted higher as compared to those living in the urban areas in 2004 elections to Lok Sabha.
- 4) **Employment, Education:** It has been found from the study that educated employed women are more likely to be active in politics.
- 5) **Media Exposure:** The study also reveals that women, who had a high exposure to media, also had higher participation in election campaigning.

These are the main determinants of ensuring participation of women in politics .Now we are going to discuss the factors responsible for lower level of representation of women in the political process.

Reasons for Low Representation of Women in Political Process in India:

- 1) **Socio-Cultural Factors:** The socio-cultural traditions and customs act as hindrances in the equal recognition of women in the legislative bodies. In Indian society women are primarily entrusted with the responsibility for looking after the family and the children. The male dominated social structure doesn't allow them to freely participate in the electoral process .Women can't take decision on their own in terms of participating freely in political activities ,their decisions are largely influenced by the family members.
- 2) **Political Obstacles:** The existence of masculine model of politics where the men mostly dominate the political arena and formulate the rules that govern the political system act as the obstacle in ensuring women's participation in the political process.
- 3) **Lack of Reservation Policy:** Lack of reservation policy in India in the legislature to provide quota towards women as an affirmative action to ensure gender balanced legislative structure can also be cited as a factor for under- representation of women in the elected bodies.
- 4) **Lack of National Consensus:** Lack of national consensus and willingness on the part of the political parties to give more tickets to women in elections can also be mentioned as one of the factors restricting women's equal representation in the legislature.

- 5) **Lack of Awareness of Electoral Politics:** Lack of awareness and knowledge of electoral politics and lack of support from the family and the political parties severely affects women's participation in electoral process.

Panchayatiraj Institutions and Empowerment of Women: One of the significant constitutional developments that triggered the process of strengthening grass-root democracy in India is the 73rd constitutional amendment act that paved the way for establishing the Panchayatiraj Institutions (PRIs). Through this act provision has been made to ensure reservation of 33% seats to women in local self govts and to enable women to have their say in the decision making process. It has been treated as a measure of broadening the democratic set up in the country by giving representation to women at the grass-root level. This has led to increased level of women joining the PRIs as members. Again it has also led to increased level of participation of women in the Gram Sabha meetings .Most of these Gram Sabhas witnessed the women as their Pradhan.

However in this context it may be noted that such kind of trend could not be expected to continue for long as the women face many hurdles in their day to day life .In order to meet the survival needs of their family ,women hardly get enough time to freely participate in the public affairs .From the studies conducted by the activist groups in Maharashtra like Alochana and Stree Adhar Kendra which also conduct training programme for making women aware of their new roles within the PRIs ,it has been found that women find various difficulties from the male dominated social structure which don't allow them to freely take part in the public sphere. The Alochana study quotes a village woman saying that when she asked her husband for permission to attend the training camp, he had countered with the question "who will make the chappatis?"

It may be noted that on the basis of training and research experiences from Gujarat and Maharashtra in terms of participation of women in the political activities at the grass-root level, it has been observed that women's participation in the public sphere is not always accepted easily by the village community .This shows that though women elected representatives experienced certain amount of self-assertion and empowerment ,it didn't ensure sensitivity to gender issues in our society .Again ,reference could also be made to the incident of rape of Bhanwari Bai(a development worker in Rajasthan who tried to stop child marriage in her village) in 1993.

And men also try to manipulate the system. They try to get their wives or other female relatives elected to the panchayats and exercise power through them.

Again, it has been seen in many instances that where the post of sarpanch is reserved for a woman, men try to intimidate them from applying for the post with horror stories of murky politics, character assassination and so on.

It is generally expected that participation in the public sphere would help in empowerment of women .However, question arises here whether reservation for women in a system of party politics change gender equations? At the same time it can't be ignored that

this kind of politicisation has taken place in a society where caste, class and gender norms and ideologies intersect in complex, interrelated yet antagonistic relationships. A society which centres around certain conservative and superstitious ideologies can lead towards some complexities in the functioning of democratic political institutions. It can be proved through an incident that took place in Madhya Pradesh that reflects that as long as negative gender values and notions of family honour remain unchanged, women's involvement in power positions does not mitigate their vulnerability. In M.P., in the Khandwa district, a 50 year old sarpanch from a backward caste was allegedly gang-raped in the presence of her husband. The background of the incident was that her brother had eloped with a married woman. The male relatives of the girl (who also belonged to the same community as the sarpanch) wished to extract the customary compensation from her. But, when the sarpanch failed to agree on the amount it resulted in her gang-rape as a vengeance.

The above discussion has revealed that until and unless there is total social transformation, political empowerment of women can't be achieved. Social and political democracy should go hand in hand. The PRIs should act as the medium of ensuring gender responsive governance that embodies measures, attitudes and practices of different stakeholders, both men and women at different levels of govt. with a clear purpose to impact issues that foster gender equality and social justice. And emphasis should be given on democratising the decision making process in a political system and a sensible proportional representation system which can guarantee the representation of the marginalised groups such as women instead of focussing mainly upon reservation or quotas.

Ways to Ensure Equal Political Participation and Representation of Women in India:

Adequate measures should be taken to ensure equal participation and representation of women in the elected bodies in India. These are mentioned below-

- 1) In order to ensure the organisation of a gender balanced legislative structure there is the need of immediate electoral and parliamentary reforms. The women's reservation bill has proved to be one of the effective ways to ensure greater level of representation of women in the parliaments across the world. It is therefore need of the hour to achieve a national level consensus to pass the women's reservation bill.
- 2) Again, the role of political parties is also very important in this regard. Political parties can take a concerted efforts to mobilise women. It has been seen that the manifestos of major political parties in the last few elections have included gender issues. But the manifesto promises must be fulfilled by the parties after coming to power.
- 3) The non-governmental organisations including women's human rights and community groups, labour unions and other civil society institutions can contribute in various ways in ensuring women's political participation. They may focus upon certain priorities that may include identifying women to stand as candidates, providing training on dealing with the media and other issues and developing networks to ensure women's participation in politics.

- 4) Media, particularly the electronic media can play an effective role through focussing on issues of special concern to women and through conveying effective voter education messages that may have major impact on women's participation in electoral process.
- 5) The International community should provide advice on legislation, electoral systems and best practices across the countries in the world that can advance women's participation in the electoral process.

Conclusion: In the conclusion, it may be stated that political representation is an important step in democratising and engendering the process of governance .From the above discussions it is clear that women's representation in the Lok Sabha throughout the ages remains very low, despite the declining gender gap in voter's turnout in elections. The barriers that restrict women from participating in the electoral process need to be addressed as soon as possible. An increased participation of women in all the spheres of political life and electoral competition will ensure parity in the public arena and it will also serve the larger issues concerning womenfolk of the society thereby leading towards the uplift and empowerment of women and a gender balanced society. Again ,it is the women themselves that should come forward and be ready to play an active role in politics towards making Indian Democracy more vibrant, vigilant and gender equitable.

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