



POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA – CURRENT TRENDS

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Abstract

The equal participation of men and women in decision making bodies and vital policy makings is an indicator of maturity and efficacy of democracy in any country. India being considered as largest democracy in the world and the constitution of India attempts to remove gender inequalities by banning discrimination based on sex and class. An analysis of the women's voting pattern in India reveals that there has been an increasing female turnout in recent years. However they continue to be under-represented in legislative bodies. This paper analysis the socio-cultural and economic factors responsible for meagre political participation of women in India. And the paper concludes Quota for women as only means through which women can secure a rightful place in society.

Key Words- Women, decision making bodies, political participation, and quota

Introduction

Political participation is defined in various ways. Political participation means not just exercising the right to vote, it includes wide range of other activities like membership of political party, electoral campaigning, attending party meetings, demonstrations, communication with leaders, holding of party positions, contesting elections, membership in representative bodies, participation in decision making. The active participation of women and their engagement in electoral process is an indicator of maturity and efficacy of democracy in any country. (Political Participation and women in India)

Political participation of women can be measured in three different dimensions –their participation as a voter, their participation as an elected representatives and their participation in the actual decision making process.

Role of women in national struggle for freedom- Women in India entered the political process in the early decades of the present century, through their massive participation in the national struggle for freedom under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The first session of Indian National Congress was attended by six women delegates. Women played a crucial role in Swadeshi and Boycott movement. Gandhi was instrumental in bringing women to the forefront of the Non-Cooperation movement. Women took active part in boycotting foreign goods, picketing in schools, colleges and courts, organising processions, spinning wheel(charka). During the Civil Disobedience Movement women in large number took part in the 'Dandi March' led by Gandhiji and directly participated in making salt out of sea water. Thousands of women and girl students took active part in the Quit India movement of 1942. (Ghosh 2010) Immediately after the passing of the Quit India resolution women leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Amrit Kaur, Rameswari Nehru, and others were taken into custody. Women were also part and parcel of the revolutionary activities of the extremist section of the freedom fighters who believed in forcible overthrow of the British Raj. Sister Nivedita, Sarala Devi Choudharani, Madam Bhikaji Kama were prominent among the women revolutionaries. There were around 1500 women soldiers in the Rani Jhansi Regiment of 'Azad Hind Fouz' prominent among them were Commander Lakshmi Swaminatha, Janaki Davar, Mayawati Arya. (Sinha 2006)

Indian women were also fighting for their right to vote and right to get elected in the legislatures. In 1917, even before the women in England got their right to vote, Sarojini Naidu in a petition to the British parliament demanded voting rights for Indian women. By 1929, all the provincial legislatures in India guaranteed women the right to vote at par with men. The Karachi session of the Indian National Congress in 1931 accepted women's equal political rights with men.

There were many women organisation which played a prominent role like Nari Satyagraha Samiti and Satyagrahi Sevaka Dal organised processions and violated the salt law. Organisations like women's Swadeshi League and Desh Sevika, Rashtriya Stree Sangha were quite active.

The Freedom Movement and Indian women's widespread participation in it, thus brought out a conducive climate for perceptible changes in many areas. Women's education and participation in work outside home and in the income generation, were some of the changes which came out.

Constitutional Provisions for Women -The Preamble of Constitution of India guarantees –Justice, Liberty and Equality to all its citizens. Constitution provides for equality of women and called State to take measures to neutralise the socio-economic, educational and political disadvantage faced by women.

Article 14 guarantees equality before law and equal protection of law within the territory of India.

Article 15 prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Article 15(3) State can make special provisions for the benefit of women and children.

Article 16 guarantees Equality of opportunity in the matter of employment. No citizens can be denied employment of the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, decent, place of birth, residence or any of them.

Article 39 (a) provides for an adequate means of livelihood for all citizen, Article 39(b)has provisions for equal pay for equal work for both men and women, Article 39 (c) has provisions for securing the health and strength of men and women and not to abuse the tender age of children.

Article 42 guarantees just and humane condition of work and maternity relief.

Article 325 and 326 guarantees political equality, equal right to participate in the political activity and right to vote, respectively.

Article 243 (D) provides for the political reservation to women in every panchayat election, it has extended this reservation to elected office as well. (Chadha 2014)

But it is really unfortunate that what is assured in the constitution is not actually realised in the day to day affairs of our country. It is, therefore, felt necessary to make special legal provisions for women in accordance with the spirit of the provisions laid down in the clause (3) of Article 15 of the constitution. The demand for greater representation of women in political institutions in India was taken up seriously after the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India. It suggested that female representation in political institutions especially at the grass-roots level needed to be increased through a policy of reservation of seats for women. In 1988, the National Perspective Plan for women in its first draft suggested that 30 percent reservation be provided for women from panchayat to parliament, but later in its final draft restricted the reservation to the panchayat level. The national consensus around this demand resulted in the adoption of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment in 1993 that provided 33 percent reservation in institutions of local governance.(Rai, 2011) This has been implemented in all states of India without any opposition. Panchayath Raj Institutions have brought about significant changes in the lives of women, The Panchayath villages have become a political training ground for women, who have become self-confident and politically aware and are transforming local governance by sensitising the state to issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice. But the constitution (Eighty-first Amendment bill), popularly known as Women's Reservation Bill which was tabled in the Lok Sabha on 12th September, 1996, raised opposition from several political parties regarding issues of elitism and overlapping quotas for women generally and for lower caste women, and the bill introduced twenty three years ago is yet to be passed.(Mandal 2003)

Political participation of women as Voter- The percentage of women exercising their voting rights in 1962 was 46.6 percent, the difference in voter turnout among men and women was 16.7 percent. In 1998 the percentage of women voters was 53.63 percent. In 2014 parliamentary general elections the turnout of women voters has steadily increased to 65.54 percent (Rai-) and in 2019 general election the percentage of women voters was 67.18 percent.

The Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) in general election 2019 tried to lure women voters through a number of welfare schemes like 'Beti Bachao Beti Padho' (Save the girl child, educate the girl child) It even went so far to push for a ban on triple talaq, a Muslim practice that allows for 'instant divorce'. Both BJP and Congress in their manifesto promised that they will implement 33% reservation of seats for women in Parliament and state assemblies if they come to power. The BJP manifesto also promised that if voted to power, the government would ensure the financial empowerment for women. In order to encourage women voters, the Election Commission of India set up pink booth in some constituency which are exclusive for women voters and managed by women election officers.

Table 1 indicates how the gender gap in voting has narrowed down in 2019 election.

Table 1: Voting Percentage in various Lok Sabha elections

General Election	Year	Male	Female	Total
1st	1952	-	-	61.2
2nd	1957	-	-	62.2
3rd	1962	63.31	46.63	55.42
4th	1967	66.73	55.48	61.33
5th	1971	60.90	49.11	55.29
6th	1977	65.63	54.91	60.49
7th	1980	62.16	51.22	56.92
8th	1984	68.18	58.60	63.56
9th	1989	66.13	57.32	61.95
10th	1991	61.58	51.35	56.93
11th	1996	62.06	53.41	57.94
12th	1998	65.72	57.88	61.97
13th	1999	63.97	55.64	59.99
14th	2004	52.65	44.65	48.74
15th	2009	60.2	55.8	58.2
16th	2014	67.1	65.6	66.4
17th	2019	67.01	67.18	67.09

Source- Statistical Report- Election Commission of India, 2019 & Voting Percentage in various lok sabha elections- Official website of Chief Electoral Officer- Government of Uttarkhand , 2014.

The study conducted by Lokniti, a programme of the Centre for study of Developing Societies and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, found that the women`s participation in election as voters has seen a sharp increase in recent years, which is a reflection of women asserting their fundamental right to vote and elect their representatives. Urban women, with access to higher education and those who were married reported lesser impact of family influence in deciding who to vote. The study also indicated that women having higher exposure to news through various news media, showed more interest in politics and were active on online platform for political activities as compared to rural women having no access to education, and women having no or low exposure to news media. The study found a direct link between the higher degree of exposure of women to news media to their higher socio-economic status.

Women`s Representation in legislature- Though the turnout of women voters in election has increased, but they are still not well represented in Parliament. In 1952, they constituted 4.4 percent of the total members in the lower house which has increased to 12 percent in 2009 and 14 percent in 2019 election. All the major political parties are in fact, reluctant to field women candidates during elections. The elusive factor of ‘win ability’ is used as a mask to explain why high proportion of women candidates are not nominated by parties. The fact that political parties still have male dominated decision making structure, appears to be the main reason. In the 2019 general election Congress fielded 54 female candidates followed by BJP at 53. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) comes third with 24 female candidates, followed by the Trinamool Congress (TMC) that had 23 women candidates. While CPI (M) fielded 10 and CPI fielded 4 female candidates. (Zee News, May 24th, 2019) Of the 435 seats contested by BJP only 12.6 percent were women. The situation was similar in Congress with only 12.9 percent of its candidates were women, The Mayawati-led BSP contested total of 383 seats, but women candidates were only 6.3 per cent.

The number of women candidates who contested the elections has doubled from 284 in general election held in 1999 to 556 in general election of 2009. The women contesting the election saw a slight increase to 668 (8 percent) out of 8251 total candidates in 2014 election. In 2019 general election the number of women representatives increased to 78. Out of 8026 total candidates contested 724 were women.

Current trends- In the 2019 general election out of the total 29 states, women MP`s were elected only from 22 states. And seven states had no female representation in the parliament. The seven states were Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Sikkim. Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal elected the highest number of women MP`s, with 11 candidates each. Out of National political parties, the BJP had maximum number of winning women MP`s at 41. (News 18, 2019)

While 2019 general election witnessed the highest number of representation of women in Lok Sabha, still the equal representation of women in Parliament still has a long way to go.

Worldwide figures on the representation of women in leadership and political participation in Parliament are extremely low.

Only 24.3 percent of all national parliamentarians were women as of 1st February 2019. (IPU- UN ,Women map of Women in Politics, 2019) As of June 2019, 11 women are serving as Head of the state and 12 are serving as Head of the Government. Rwanda has the highest number of women parliamentarians worldwide- 61.3 percent seat in lower house of legislature, followed by Cuba with 53.2 percent and Bolivia with 53 percent. (World Economic Forum) Table 2 indicates that India has less number of women in parliament when compared to its neighbouring countries like Nepal, Pakistan, Bhutan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Such a dismal picture is all the more surprising because India boast of a number of efficient and courageous women Politicians or administrators who have proved their mettle in the field of politics and administration since the early medieval period of Indian history.

Table 2-Women`s Representation in South Asian Countries

Country	Chamber	Percentage of women
Afghanistan	House of People	27.87
Bangladesh	Parliament	20.63
Bhutan	National Assembly	14.89
India	House of People	14.39
Iran	Islamic Parliament of Iran	5.88
Maldives	People of Majlis	4.6
Nepal	House of Representatives	32.73
Pakistan	National Assembly	20.23
Srilanka	Parliament	5.33

Source-Inter Parliamentary Union, Compare data on Parliament, December 2019.

Women in Decision-making position in India

Women`s participation in decision making process is vital to sustain democracy. This fact was realised at the UN convention on the political rights of women in 1952. All congresses worldwide emphasised the need for political participation of women. They discussed and planned strategies to achieve this objective. Significant deliberation on women`s empowerment was made in (a) World Plan of Action in (1975) in Mexico; (b) The Copenhagen Programme of Action (1980) (c) World Conference on the UN Decade of Women in Nairobi (1985) and (d) the World Congress of Women in Beijing (1995). (Fadia, 2014)

In 2015, September, the member states of United Nations unanimously adopted a new global agenda to end poverty by 2030. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs) includes a specific goal to achieve gender equality, which aims to end discrimination and violence against women and girls and ensure equal participation and opportunity in all sphere of life. The target to achieve this goal is through women`s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life.(UN-Women)

Sarojini Naidu was the first lady Governor in the Republic of India. She held the office from 1947 to 1949. Smt. Vijayalakshmi Pandit was the Governor of Maharashtra from 1962 to 1964. She was also the India`s Ambassador to USSR during 1947 -1949 and President of UN General Assembly in 1954.

Indira Gandhi was a bold key decision-maker and her decisions had great impact on the Indian political system. She personalised and centralised politics. During her regime, the constitutional system of India became Prime Ministerial system. By her decisions she eroded the federal system in India.

The late, 1980s and 1990s have witnessed the emergence of women political leaders who have influenced political decision-making at the national and state level.

Jayalalitha emerged as a powerful Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu after the death of M. G. Ramachandra. Jayalalitha`s AIADMK party became the principal ally of the BJP led government in 1998. On Cauvery issue, the AIADMK warned Prime Minister Vajpayee of “disastrous consequences” if his government did not notify immediately the scheme on Cauvery water in the official gazette and table it in parliament. Jayalalitha withdrew her 18 MPs support from government after the Union cabinet rejected outright her demands to reinstate former naval chief Vishnu Bhagwat.

Mayawati is one of the most dynamic dalit leaders. She became the first women dalit chief minister in the year 1995. She focused on social welfare measures for the upliftment of ‘Bhahujans’ – other backward classes, Schedule caste, and Schedule tribes. Mayawati`s rise from humble beginning was referred as ‘miracles of democracy’ by former Prime Minister of India, P.V. Narasimha Rao. She was the instrumental in toppling Vajpayee`s government in 1999, by the lowest margin of just one vote.

Mamta Banerji- Mamta Banerji is a firebrand leader. Mamta split vertically the Congress (I) in West Bengal on August 9, 1997. She claimed her Trinamul Congress was the real Congress. In 1984 general election Banerji became one of India`s youngest parliamentarian defeating veteran Communist politician Somnath Chatterjee. In 2011, Banerji won a sweeping majority which ended the 34 years rule of the Left Front and she became the Chief Minister Of West Bengal. (Sinha 2006)

In 2000's the women who came to prominence were Sonia Gandhi, SushmaSwaraj, Nirmala Sitharam and SmritiIrani.

SushmaSwaraj- In March 1998, Under Prime minister Vajpayee, she was sworn in as Union Cabinet minister for Information and Broadcasting with an additional charge of the ministry of Telecommunication. She was the leader of opposition in 15th loksabha. She served as Minister of External Affairs under Prime Minister Narendra Modi from May 2014 to May 2019.

SmritiIrani – She is currently the youngest minister in the council of Ministers at the age of 43. She defeated Rahul Gandhi- President of Indian National Congress in 2019 general election. She is serving as Minister of Textiles and given additional charge as Minister of Women and Child Development.

Nirmala Sitharaman- She is a member of the Rajya Sabha. In 2014 she served as the Defence Minister of India and in 2019 she became Finance Minister, the second female finance minister after Indira Gandhi.

PrathibhaPatil- She was the 12th President of India and the first women to hold that office.

Sheila Dikshit was the longest serving Chief minister of Delhi for a period of 15 years.

Kiran Bedi is the first woman to join the Indian Police Service (IPS). After retirement she joined Bharatiya Janata party in January 2015. She played a key role in Indian anti-corruption movement. On 22, May 2016, she was appointed as the lieutenant Governor of Puducherry.

Meira Kumar was the Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment from 2004 to 2009. She was the 15th Speaker of LokSabhs from 2009 to 2014. Prior to being appointed as Speaker, she had been elected to the 8th, 11th, 12th, and 14th, Lok Sabha.

Sumitra Mahajan was eldest, senior most and longest serving woman Member of Parliament in the 16th, Lok Sabha. She was the second woman after Meira Kumar to be elected as the Speaker of the Lok Sabha.

Sonia Gandhi took over as leader of Indian National Congress party in 1998, and played a prominent role in rejuvenating the dying Congress party. She was instrumental in formulating the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which got elected for two terms in 2004 and 2009. She played an important role in passing the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Right to Information Act.

Although, India has seen women participating in politics as the longest serving Prime ministers, as Chief ministers of various states, members in national parliament, and state legislative assemblies in large numbers, yet the occurrence has not been corresponding to their population.

Reasons for meagre participation of women in Politics- Though the percentage of women voters in India has increased considerably, their presence in the country's decision making bodies, in the process of vital policy making, has left much to be desired. It is said that the personality traits of women, the socio-economic and cultural environment in which they are brought up and India's political environment as such are to a great extent responsible for women's meagre participation in the field of politics. One may even cite general apathy among women towards politics as a reason for their little presence in important political post. But such apathy is the product of the social conditions in which women are brought up. Lesser exposure to education facilities, lesser economic freedom, the role the society expects a girl child to perform in future, the social taboos, the difference in attitude of the parents and other relatives towards a boy and a girl make things difficult for women in general. Women generally regard politics as a risky game. Therefore, they want to keep themselves away from politics. Violence and threat of violence affects women's ability to participate actively in politics and in decision – making positions. In a time when digital spaces play a prominent role in our daily life, digital violence or cyber bullying are aimed at silencing the voices of women who are politically active. Women in India are generally expected to manage household affairs, and to provide support and inspire a man to be successful in his life. The reign of muscle power, criminalisation and corruption in Indian politics may have a bearing on women's indifference towards politics. And the average Indian parents hardly dream of their girl child to become an administrator, a police or a military officer, not to talk of a politician or a people's representative in the legislature. They normally nurture the idea of their daughter being a successful housewife. Naturally, the confidence, the conviction necessary for success in public life are found to be lacking in most of the women of our land. (Nisha, 2018) (Rai, 2018)

Solution to strengthen women's political participation-

Women in India have made major inroads in various male dominated professions. They have proved themselves in the fields of business, art, medicine, engineering, law and culture. But they have failed to gain grounds in politics, which indicates that representation of women in politics needs special consideration. This should be rooted in the following solutions:

- Through active involvement of civil society organisation in educating women of their rights. Training programmes should be organised at the village and national level by extension personnel's for creating awareness among women about their rights, how they can come out of their socio-cultural barriers, training on various aspects of

Panchayat Raj Institutions should be provided – provisions of 73rd amendment, writing records, conducting meetings, understanding of bureaucratic structure, government schemes for the rural poor are some of the areas in which training could be given.

- Women should be encouraged to organise themselves through Mahila mandal and Self-help groups. Government should provide financial aid to these groups who are successfully working and encouraging women representation in the political arena.
- Media can play a crucial role in highlighting the positive contribution of women in politics and avoid making any negative gender –based remarks.
- Government need to demonstrate gender equality in their decision making bodies by not only increasing female representation in ministerial and elected position, but also by fostering gender – equitable work culture in state institutions. Government could adopt gender- responsive policies and practices in governing institutions like parental leave, child care services and fixed hours for voting debate and negotiating in decision making bodies such as national and regional parliaments, to ensure that female- leaders are able to function in an open and inclusive work environment.
- A well designed and properly implemented quota for women, can be effective, temporary measures to increase women`s access to decision- making positions. (Strengthen Girls` and Women`s Political Participation and Decision-Making Power) The countries which have more women legislators had quota as a common factor. Quota for women had a dramatic impact on Rwandan with highest number of women parliamentarians worldwide- 61.3 percent.

Conclusion- In recent years there has been a marked increase in women voters turn out in election. But they continue to be under-represented in legislature. The only way to increase women participation in politics would be through active involvement of civil society organisation in educating women of their rights. Government need to demonstrate gender equality in their decision making bodies bypassing the long standing Women Reservation Bill. The countries which have more women legislators had quota as a common factor. Quota for women had a dramatic impact on Rwandan with highest number of women parliamentarians worldwide- 61.3 percent. The current government has been a women inclusive government with six women ministers, raising hopes those in coming years more women will be in crucial decision making position.

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