



WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

The development of any nation only depends on the status of women in the society. Fifty percent of the world's population comprises of women. In this male dominated society, women have always suffered. We need to make the women of our country strong socially, economically, psychologically and politically and we need to tell the men of our country about their wrongdoings. The position of women stays the same everywhere. In a country like India, on one hand the goddess is a woman and on the other hand she is ill-treated, oppressed, suppressed, and exploited by the males of our society. The United Nations report states that "woman constitutes half of the world population, perform nearly 2/3 of works hours, receive one tenth of the world's income and own less than one-hundredth percent of the world's property." One of the major problem's which women are dealing today is with the political participation. Not all women are given the equal rights in the society to choose their desired candidate or stand in elections or go for election campaigns or even be associated with political parties.

Key-words: women, political participation, patriarchy, laws for political participation, equality.

INTRODUCTION

Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details in the activities of man, and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. -Mahatma Gandhi

Politics involves representation, policy, power and position with Government as its area. Political participation refers to the participation of individuals in the political process. It ensures that individuals are able to take part in deciding the common goals of the society and the best ways of achieving it. Political participation means not merely exercising the right to vote, but also power sharing, decision making, policy making at all levels of governance of the State. Political participation refers to actual participation in these voluntary activities by which the members of the society share in selection of rules and formulation of public policy directly or indirectly. The participation of women and their involvement

in electoral process is an important marker of the maturity of democracy in any country. It can be defined as equality and freedom with which women share political power with men. Despite various provisions in the constitution, women in the Indian subcontinent continue to be under-represented in the legislatures, both at the national and the state levels. The number of female representatives in legislative bodies in the Centre and in most of the states of India is below 20%, reflecting a pan Indian gender exclusion from electoral participation and quality representation. The Indian female participants in the electoral politics are mainly less because of political party competition, as national political parties and the regional political parties in the states discriminate not only in terms of seat allotments, but also in the party rank and file and chain of command. This is a major contributor to the party competition structure in the Indian politics that is ruled by inherent male dominance and a patriarchal mindset that excludes women from the electoral process.

At the same time, even though India is considered to be a country which follows equality, the lawmakers or the people in the politics are to a certain extent influenced by the old-time rules and customs of male dominance and patriarchy especially when it comes to matters of making laws for the society and governing the people. This poses a problem when it comes to devising efficient solutions and also creates a dilemma as to what is more important; preserving something that has been practiced for long or making a change and trying methods which shall bring equality in the society. This can be addressed by going back to the origin.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says, “It’s a girl.” –Shirley Chisholm The roots of the present always lie in the past. So, the justification of the law relating to the political participation of the women can be appropriately scrutinized only by looking into the past history of any system. The way to shed some light on the women’s right of political participation is to look at its past at national as well as global level. If we see the international history of women’s political participation, the history of equal participation of women in the political fields in a few countries, it can be observed that in ancient Greece and Republican Rome as well as in few more democracies having emerged in Europe, women were completely not given voting rights by the end of the 18th century. In the United States of America, the women in this country were the first ones to fight for their right to vote in the whole world. If we see the Indian history, women have a record of suffering and exploitation. The women have remained victims of violence and also, they have suffered various types of discrimination, exploitation and torture- both physical and mental not only in the men’s society but also within their own house by their family thereby disturbing the balance in the society. Before Independence, Local Self-Governments have existed in India since. Vedas, Puranas, Smritis and books on statecrafts and religious texts have vivid description of this. In the past, the Panchayati Raj system was

confined to solve social problems with the help of five senior members of village called 'Panchas'.² The fact that women are capable of exhibiting extraordinary qualities of leadership is visible by the participation of many women during the national freedom movement. There were many women who fought during the freedom struggle but some of them who were the prominent women were Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, Sucheta Kriplani, Aruna Asif Ali, Kasturba Gandhi and Kamala Nehru. They stand out prominently for their leadership skills. The demand for women's voting rights was initiated by Sarojini Naidu who led a delegation of Indian Women before the British Parliament in the year 1917. Consulting the Reforms Act of 1921 women were given the right to vote, but this right came with certain restrictions like wifehood, property and education. The Government of India Act of 1935 granted voting rights to all women without any conditions as it was there in the Reforms Act of 1921. Finally, the Constitution of India in the year of 1950 gave all women equal political and legal rights.

The status of women in Indian politics was never more significant than after independence. This golden era for women in Indian politics started with the name of Mrs. Vijayalakshmi Pandit. She was an active worker in Indian Nationalist Movement and was the first Indian to be elected the president of UN General Assembly in 1953. Then came Sucheta Kriplani who became Chief Minister of UP in 1963. The most important name in the category of women politicians came in 1966 and that was Mrs. Indira Gandhi. She became the first woman Prime Minister of India in 1966 and made the world stop and notice the immense potential of women.

Today as per 73rd and 74th amendment acts, all local elected bodies reserve 1/3rd of their seats for women. The names such as Mamta Banerjee, J.Jayalalitha, Uma Bharti, Vasundhara Raje Sindhia, Sushma Swaraj, Rabdi Devi, Mayawati and last but not the least the two young MP's Agatha Sangma and Supriya Sule are the well known politicians.

VARIOUS METHODS IN WHICH WOMEN CAN PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS IN INDIA

During the old times, political power was in the hands of a few and these people were considered to be as important. In India, women participating in political activities and programs are of recent origin. According to Myron Weiner, "The concept of political participation refers to any voluntary action, successful or unsuccessful, organized or unorganized, episodic or continuous, employing legitimate or illegitimate methods, intended to influence the choice of public policies, the administration of public affairs, or the choice of political leaders at any level of Government, local or national". Women are still fighting with the society to eradicate the old norms and traditions which stopped women from political participation. The actual interest of women in politics and the extent to which women can participate in politics is explained in the later stages:

i. Voting Right: Voting is the commonest yet the most important act of political participation. Women constitute half the population of the country, as a result they play an important role in politics of the country, yet they are not given equal importance. There have been a number of schemes which have been initiated for women voters so that they can know the importance of voting. More awareness is required to be created so that women are encouraged to go and cast their vote. This political right to vote is granted to all adult citizens irrespective of their sex from the time the constitution came into power on 26th January 1950 when the first free elections were held. All the votes carry equal weightage whether it is a male vote or a female vote.

(ii) Participation in canvassing, political meetings and agitations: As women became more aware about politics and gained education. The method of personal contact with the voters will help in gaining more votes and support for the political party through political meeting and agitations. Campaigning also helps in getting attention of the people about what the party plans on doing and what are its ideologies. Campaigning often helps people to come and vote who usually do not go and vote. People also actively start working for a party when campaigning begins, they often initiate a political meeting or rally or are a part of it. The people working for a party often contribute money to the party as they believe that the ideologies of the party and the leadership can help them win in the future and fulfill their needs through the party. Membership of women in these political clubs are really important as through these methods they can represent their group which lacks representation and the public who doesn't know them. Great leaders like Mayawati and Mamata Bannerjee are the women political leaders who have been Chief Ministers representing their marginalized group and their various interests.

(iii) Membership in any association or political party: Traditionally, only a few women were allowed or were associated to a political party. In Muslims, only elite women were allowed to be a part of the political party. This was mainly because these women came from backgrounds who had a standing in politics or were economically well off. But now the times are changing as due to various socio-political processes more women are taking part in political parties. In today's date, a woman can be a leader, a social figure and a person a person who can bring a change. Women are victims to various aggression in the society, as a result, women have started forming groups which work for women facing violence and aggressive behavior. There are various NGOs which work for women who also conduct movements to get justice. In the case of Nirbhaya in 2012. Various NGOs came together seeking justice for the girl. Women who are a part of such political parties prefer to work for the betterment of the society. There are various groups which work for the poor by providing them education, financial support, etc., these groups are affiliated to the political parties who on a large scale benefit the whole country.

OBSTACLES AND BARRIERS FOR NON-PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS IN INDIA

The Constitution of India gives universal adult franchise to both men and women with equal rights to participate in electoral competition, but the existing societal value system, the private-public divide in terms of domain identification in political institutions restrict women from exercising their electoral rights and a fair participation in electoral competition as it is dominated by men.

These factors also act as key barriers and obstacles in women's active participation in the Indian electoral system and in the larger issue of women's advancement as a whole. One of the main barriers to participation of women in politics in this country is illiteracy. India has one of the largest illiterate populations. Illiteracy limits the ability of the women to understand the political system and issues. Due to illiteracy, many women are sometimes left of the voters list and, as a result, they are not able to exercise their political right. Women who are into active politics and are not educated are not able to handle the office efficiently as the women who are educated have access to all sources of communication like memos and newspaper which helps them to be updated with all the latest news which helps them to make wise political decision. Poverty is another barrier which has led to low political participation of women in India. Often poor people have no direct voting stance. It is often influenced by rich and well-off people. Just before elections the poor people are given resources such as blankets, television, food, alcohol by various political party workers so that these people vote in favour of them. There are various political parties who work for the poor people and there are some political groups and parties who only work for these groups. These political parties don't win easily as they are low in their funds if compared to other political parties who get their funding from rich business tycoons. Rich business tycoons invest in the parties from which they will get adequate returns. But from these poor people, they shall get no returns as they do not pay that much tax which the other citizens of the country pay who are better off than these poor people. The institution of marriage is another barrier which leads to less political participation of women in India. After a woman gets married, all her political decisions are controlled by the family she is married into if she comes from an uneducated family. Even if she comes from an educated family, to an extent she is influenced by the family she is married to and often there is a clash in ideology. After getting married, the woman has hardly any time to contest elections or go for campaigns as she has new responsibility added to her shoulders. She needs to look after her family, she needs to look after the kids, needs to do all the household work, even go to work.

CONCLUSION AND SOLUTIONS

Any meaningful assessment of the political participation of women should begin with asking whether lack of sufficient representation is responsible for their low status or is it their poor status that is responsible for the exclusion of women from certain levels of political power. "Education is the most powerful tool that can be used to change the world." This is one of the

major solutions to so many problems faced by India. The more we educate, higher the number of people who are aware of their rights. As we start eliminating illiteracy, we also change the way people think and this makes them more rational towards problems faced by various sections of society. Injustice is something that shouldn't be tolerated and by education, we empower people to stand up for themselves, refrain from harming others and at the same time make remedies more accessible. It also instills in citizens a sense of being protected as they will realize that there is recourse in law for them.

Educating the masses is definitely not a piece of cake and on the other hand, it's a hard task to make people evolve in terms of their mindset. Even though our current society does have people who are highly educated, we still find them backward/narrow minded in the way they think. Education isn't the only tool that should be absolutely relied upon to solve this problem. The government has been providing free education and mid-day meals but how many families are actually willing to send their kids to school? It also comes down to the aspect of poverty where sending the child to work would be a source of additional income. It is a tradeoff between earning extra money for survival and education and most people under these circumstances would choose money that is necessary for survival.

At last I would like to conclude with a quote "In politics, if you want anything said, ask a man. If u want anything done, ask a woman."

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