



WOMENS ROLE & PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IN INDIA

K.Venkateswarlu,
Research Scholar (Ph.D),
Department of Sociology,
Osmania University, Hyderabad- 7,
Telangana.

Abstract

Political participation of women in any country gives an overview of how women are treated in society. The development of any country also depends on the equal participation of men and women. Since women's presence is seemed to be low in Indian politics, it is the duty of every human being to make them aware of their rights and motivate them for participating in mainstream politics. The constitution of India not only guarantees equality in society but also suggests states to make special provisions for women. Women still are fighting for equal status in society. Because of their low representation in Indian politics, their issues and problems are generally unseen and unnoticed. Their genuine demands are not raised before the decisions makers. Women need be dependent to make their own decisions. This paper aims to examine the current laws and legislations related to political participation of women along with other laws that are in favor of the same. It also takes into consideration various aspects such as history and the global scenario to deal with the political participation of women in India; that is the contribution of great leaders and also countries like Greece and United Kingdom. It also talks about the problems faced by women in getting equal political participation as men.

Keywords: women, political participation, equality,

Introduction

Women, in many societies, are often restricted to the roles inside the house, those of wife and mother. While major changes have occurred in the status of women in some parts of the world in recent decades, norms that restrict women to the home are still powerful in defining the activities that are deemed appropriate for women—and they exclude political life, which by its very nature takes place in a public forum. In the contemporary world, there are regimes that enforce this principle perhaps most severely (the Taliban in Afghanistan has been in the news recently), but it is also a powerful factor in many other countries such as Japan (where there is still a strong expectation that when they marry, women will leave full time employment outside the home)¹. Moreover, the impact of home-centered norms for women is not restricted to non-Western countries. The norm that “Woman's place is in the Home” prevailed in Western societies well into the 20th century and, as this article will demonstrate, it still bears significant influence. In so far as this norm is accepted, it has an inhibiting effect on women's participation in politics.

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.

WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS:

‘It is very difficult for a woman to make up her mind to enter politics. Once she makes up her own mind, then she has to prepare her husband, and her children, and her family. Once she has overcome all these obstacles and applies for the ticket, then the male aspirants against whom she is applying make up all sorts of stories about her. And after all this, when her name goes to the party bosses, they do not select her name because they fear losing that seat.’

The above quote of Sushma Swaraj (Union External Affairs Minister) gives a glimpse of reality that how women have to face so many problems and criticisms while entering the politics. India, being the largest democratic country in the world has very low representation of women in politics. Lesser women are seen in holding key positions and decision making positions in the political arena. The marginalization of Indian women in politics is as old as the Indian society. Their low representation in political sphere is one of the main reasons for the exclusion of the interests of women in governance and development paradigms. They have been kept aside from political discourse since their childhood. Men and women have always equally shared their dedication towards the development of the nation. They have worked shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts in pre independent as well as post independent India. Contribution of Rani Laxmi Bai, Durga Bai Deshmukh, Savitribai Phule, Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Madam Bhikaji Cama, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Aruna Asaf Ali, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamala Nehru, Vijaylaxmi Pandit, Sucheta Kriplani. Padmaja Naidu, Kalpana Dutta, Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Sister Nivedita, Margaret Nobel, Mira Alphonse, Meera Behn, Sarla Bhen, etc. in the Indian freedom struggle is highly noticeable. But their work was always kept unnoticed. Women's participation in politics of any country gives a strong message globally not only in terms of equality and freedom of liberty but also in the space provided for women in the democratic framework of electoral politics. India has one of the strongest laws that provide women a life with full honor and dignity. But the customs, patriarchal set ups and societal norms have always treated them as subordinate to men. They are always taught to be submissive. Because of unequal distribution of resources, women do not have adequate resources, be it economic, material or human.

The policies generally are made as gender blind because of male dominance over policy framing. Keeping women away from public sphere brings lack of political will amongst themselves. Because of patriarchal set up and male dominance over political parties, women do get chances of contesting elections. The parties do not engage and encourage women in its



decision making policies while finalizing their contestants. Women coming from less privileged background, without any political cleavage by virtue of birth, marriage or other close relative political cleavage have to face molestation and sexual harassment like situations. Because of the fear of harassment or violence, they do not show their full interest in political activities. It is the need of the hour in a country like India to have equal participation of women in mainstream political activity. Society needs to deconstruct the stereotype of women as limited to household activities only. The nature of society has a crucial impact on the extent and effectiveness of women's political participation. Their low representation in decision making institutions signifies deep flaws in the political structure of country. Historical, social and cultural factors have restricted women from enjoying their rights of participation in political processes

SOCIO CULTURAL CONTEXT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

In 2015, the socio-cultural landscape for women is a complex mixture of the new and the old. Numerous modern institutions rest on the base of the traditional. Industrialisation, globalisation, urbanisation and modernisation have led to some irreversible changes for women - some positive and some problematic. On one hand a liberalised economy has offered better education, jobs, decision making powers and opportunities for women. On the other, women have been targets of a strong backlash with increased violence in and outside the home, acute wage differentials and discrimination and continuing commodification in society.

Migration, skewed sex ratio, environmental degradation have added to the women's vulnerability. India is a male dominated society in which the economic, political, religious, social and cultural institutions are largely controlled by men. This control over women's livelihood choices and sexuality has existed and evolved over centuries through various discriminatory social practices and institutions. A combination of family, caste, community, and religion reinforce and legitimise these patriarchal values. Stereotyping of women and their roles continues in public and private institutions. Media, both state and private, with its huge potential to influence and change mind sets unfortunately has not been harnessed for this. This paradoxical situation of women in India is alarming. On one hand they are worshipped as goddesses, while on the other burnt for dowry. Boys are more desirable and seen as a support for parents in their old age as necessary to continue the family lineage. Girls are considered an unwanted burden yet used to support their brothers and men and suffer in silence as atrocities such as abuse, violence, rape and early marriages. When and if they break their silence, the repercussions are immense.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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.

THE CURRENT SCENARIO

After the independence and in the current scenario, women are holding important political and administrative offices and portfolios, such as governors, chief ministers, and ministers in cabinet and state governments, presiding officers of legislative bodies, judges of supreme court, high courts and secretaries to the Government of India. India is one of the first countries in the world to have a woman as the head of the government and as the head of the state. Women in India got the right to equal political participation, much earlier than most of the Western countries, this includes the right to vote.

OBSTACLES IN WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Illiteracy is one of the main hurdles in making women as politically empowered. Because of lack of understanding they do not know about their basic and political rights. The parties not only discriminate in terms of seat allotments in the elections, but also in the party ranks. Patriarchal context of India is also the reason for non involvement of women in the political arena. There are many reasons which are restricting women from being politically active. These reasons include the existing societal value system, the private-public divide in terms of domain identification and male preponderance in political institutions. Because of their low proportion in inner political party structure of India, they are failed to gather resources and support for nurturing their political constituencies. Women do not get adequate financial support from the political parties to contest the elections. Traditional roles assigned to them are also major constraints in women's political participation. Because of unequal distribution of resources or lack of resources and lack of education, they do not avail sufficient political training. Societal and cultural norms imposed on women bar them from entering politics. They have to accept the dictats imposed on them and bear the burden of society. They also bear their deprivation and undermining status thinking as a culture of the society. The society is full of prejudices and a victim of lack and poor awareness. Lack of participation of women in community based activities is also one of the major constraints. Almost all the resources are controlled by the male counterparts. Women do not have any say in these resources. They also do not own income generating opportunities.

Poverty is also a great challenge in realizing women's political participation. The girl child in a poor family is the main victim and has to face many problems. The rate of school drop outs



is also found to be comparatively higher in case of women. Because of the social and cultural norms, women's mindset is developed in a sense to accept that they are of a lower class than men because this has been the point of view of many in the society. On the one hand, women's literacy rate is improving. But on the other, rare women are found in higher studies because they are made to leave the schools immediately after completing their basic studies. Caste system or class structure prevalent in society is also a big hurdle. Women of lower caste could not attend schools because of the low level of income of their families. These women got themselves indulged in less paying work to take care of their families. Mostly women in India do not own lands and properties. They even hardly get any share in their parent's property. Women not only have lack of awareness about their rights enshrined in India constitution but also the lack of political will. Women's low health status in the country is also a major constraint in women's participation. There is a bias in the access of healthcare facilities in the country. Gender discrimination in case of health care facilities also begins before birth. Most of the girl children are aborted because of son preference in the family. Once born, daughters are deprived of getting those feeding services as boys do. Women are also viewed as less privileged due to marriage obligations and dowry systems. Hospitals are also termed to be gender biased as men are found more in visiting hospitals more frequently than women.

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 is 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. 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.

CONCLUSION

“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.

We need to remove the Constitutional provisions and policies guaranteeing a place of honor and equality to women because they are not enough to combat the menace of inequality. For the emancipation of women and ensuring them equality, the educational, economic and political independence of the women is of paramount importance. This can lead to total



development of the women. This goal of economic independence and empowerment of the women can be achieved only through gainful employment opportunities.

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