



Women empowerment through participation in politics.

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Abstract

Women constitute an entire half of the population and to move forward by leaving behind an entire half of the population can't be accepted as a plausible, just and sustainable model of nation-building by our policy makers. Women are one of the major stakeholders in every dimension of the society and, hence, it is imperative that they be empowered, educated and uplifted from their present state of affairs to an elevated one. It can be safely stated that political empowerment, through deliberate attempts of reservation in politics and affirmative action by the State, will not only lead to an increase in status and self-esteem of the long subjugated womenfolk, but will also lead to adopting of courses of actions favouring women's needs and issues which, otherwise, in male-dominated decision making bodies are ignored, overlooked, underestimated or met with acrimony. Much talk is being heard about delivery of good governance to the public; and good governance requires gender balance in decision making. It is, now, only a matter of time and effort on part of the State and the civil society to proffer impetus to the subtle revolution of women's empowerment that is slowly running through the social fabric of the nation by compensating the womenfolk for their undue subjugation and giving them their rightful place as equal partners to men in the decision making process, and harnessing the energies of half of the entire population to achieve a world of liberty, equality and fraternity, not only on paper but also in reality.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Nation-building, Politics, Political Participation, Reservation, Representation, Panchayat, Parliament, State Legislature

1. Introduction

Political participation is vital to the cause of women empowerment and is one of the media of achieving gender equality and justice. There can be various manifestations of women's participation in politics, such as voters, campaigners, party workers, contestants in elections etc. Among these, the factor that speaks the most in volumes about the degree of women's political participation is the quantum of women participating in elections and ultimately getting elected as political representatives to the decision making bodies. This is significant because for participation to be meaningful and fruitful, securing access to positions of power and initiating changes through decisions devoid of undue exogenous influences is important. Hence, we can see that mere political participation doesn't suffice; proper, fair and

powerful representation is equally necessary. Representation takes place when women are elected, absorbed and adapted into the decision making process, ensued by control and authority over policy making and their implementation. It is, however, imperative that in order to make a difference by stepping inside the system, a woman must render active participation in the process and make sure that her voice and opinions are not minimized under male dominance or due to unwanted influences. She should be made politically aware of the responsibilities, powers and liabilities that come along with her position and must lead to political enlightenment of the entire community as a whole. In India, which is traditionally a patriarchal society, the levels of women's political participation are quite unsatisfactory and lack uniformity across regions. The womenfolk often have to face social, familial and

religious hindrances in their path to independent decision making, be it on a personal level or in the public sphere, and they often fall victims to the diktats of their male relatives. This poses as an obstacle in achieving complete women empowerment, especially after the tremendous concerted efforts put in by the State continuously.

The attainment of political power through increased participation and representation in the political process leads to enhancement of status and self-esteem of the womenfolk who have been kept subjugated for long. And this is possible only when we can achieve greater participation of the women in the electoral process and sending a larger quantum of representation to the decision making bodies. Hence, we can safely reiterate that greater participation and representation constitute the roots of political empowerment of the women in India; it can act '.....as collective action of women against oppressive patriarchal power with a long term goal of social transformation that ensure women's liberation from exploitation, degradation, injustice, subjugation and superstition, casteism and communalism' (Vibhuti Petal, 2009)

The principles of good governance, equality, justice and development can only be achieved when the womenfolk are emancipated and empowered. This constitutes the rationale behind the need for political participation of women, and is especially true in the Indian context as Indian women have been weakened and marginalised by long practised patriarchal norms and customs. They have been victims of social discriminations, of violence, of caste and communalism, of riots, poverty and indebtedness and so on, putting their rights and entitlements in danger. It is believed that increasing women's participation and representation in the decision making process can help in bringing an end to the male dominance and usher in liberty and upliftment of the women, at least to a large extent if not fully.

One of the greatest testimonies to the link between political participation and women empowerment is the Indian Freedom Struggle. Since women, too, were equally involved in the movement, it led to development of social and political consciousness in them and also introduced them to an alternate lifestyle concerning public life, intellectual and political leadership. Direct political participation promoted women's confidence and self-reliance and broke the barriers of public-private dichotomies in their lives (Barbara J. Nelson and Najma Choudhury, 1997). In a traditional sense, a person's life is divided into the home/private and the

world/public or political. It is generally believed that the 'world' is an external web of materialism and belongs to the male dominion. On the other hand, the 'home' encapsulates all that is spiritual and profound and it manifests itself in a woman. Hence, this dichotomy has resulted in the creation of gender assigned roles and responsibilities, the boundaries of which were not to be surpassed. Thus, one gets an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into 'home' and 'world'. Eventually, practices such as these led to the subjugation and domination of women and which can be reversed only with the fusion of the two divides spheres of life.

Giving the womenfolk their due space in the decision making process is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development and an equitable society. Even the Beijing 1995 World Conference on Women has vouched for proffering women due space in decision making processes, as it will lead to their emancipation and empowerment. Women's participation in electoral process is an indicator of their political awareness and their aspiration for status enhancement (Rameswari Pandya, 2008). Women in India have been weakened and marginalised to such an extent and for so long that their disproportionate and under-representations have become an integral part of the power structure of the Indian polity. This has had an adverse effect on their social, economic and political rights. The Constitution of India has laid down that all men and women shall have equal opportunities of participation in the social, economic and political aspects of the nation, including the decision making entities at different levels. This deliberate and conscious attempt on part of the State is vital to initiate the process of reversing the disadvantages inflicted upon the womenfolk by the patriarchal societal set-up. It is also believed that women's empowerment can come only with their socio-political advancement and an increase in their number and greater participation in decision-making positions and political roles (Susheela Kaushik, 1993). Such participation in making public choices would lead to a qualitative change not merely in women's life but in the functioning of public institutions and nature of politics.

The principles on which the idea of a democracy is laid propound equal rights to women along with men, but institutionally the hallmarks of democracy have not satisfactorily achieved these guarantees. Therefore, there is a need for the women to get into these institutions and processes, gain an entry into the

functioning of the state and share control over the apparatus of the state. Only this will efficiently preserve the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity cherished by our Constitution. Hence, participation is a key component of a sound political machinery of the nation. It is argued that women's participation in decision-making bodies brings certain positive changes in political discourse, social climate of political life, policies, culture, behaviour, political attitudes, policy priorities, legislative styles and decision-making roles (G. Palanithurai, 2005). Equal participation of women in every aspect of governance is crucial to the growth of the country's economy as well as because an economic system cannot realise its full potential if half of its human resources are out of the reckoning (Poornima Advani, 2003). Therefore, the entire development process will be complete only with the full participation of the womenfolk of the country. It can be found that women contain within themselves a holistic view of matters pertaining to the spirit of development. They have been dealing with, and managing, the resources of the country for long and, hence, are repositories of wisdom and knowledge. This wisdom and knowledge, if harnessed effectively, can prove to be extremely conducive towards accelerating the growth and development of not only the nation but also of the human race. Studies have demonstrated the correlation between women's participation in governance and decision-making and the delivery of services to the people for their livelihood security and economic development.

The World Bank Report, 2001 had illustrated the inverse relation between women's involvement in public life and levels of corruption in the government. It is, thus, clear that if we desire a paradigm shift in the present political structure and governance, we need to capture more female participation in politics. The Beijing Conference had emphasised that women's participation brings into the forefront new and sensitive issues which were otherwise not paid much attention to. This is the true essence of a participatory democracy which is an inclusive political medium of attaining better ways and means of living. However, in order to achieve a meaningful participation, it is imperative that the women act without undue influences and imposed restrictions. Thus, free and fair ambience, along with equal access and opportunities, should be proffered to women in order to achieve equity and equality in the true sense of the terms.

2. Women's political participation: How the state approaches it

In the context of the Indian polity, women's political

participation can be approached in two ways –

- (a) The 'top-down' approach
- (b) The 'grassroots' approach

The 'top-down' approach holds that existence of a right at the top will lead to trickling down of the benefits accruing to that right to the bottom. Thus, a formal establishment and recognition of that right at the top, by invoking legal and constitutional bases for it will suffice. On the other hand, the grassroots approach lays emphasis on the bottom-up approach and considers it to be more effective when it comes to mobilisation of women. It believes in detecting basic group needs and the eventual creation of political pressure to resolve those needs and ushering in equality into the system. The two approaches differ in that while the former propounds the formal recognition of women's rights at the top, the latter takes a broader stance and incorporates political activism at the basic units of the society. However, both perceive politics as a system where problem solving depends on a hierarchical structure comprising of local and informal redressal mechanisms at the bottom and which leads to increasing levels of formal avenues upto the central government at the top. They complement each other in the sense that both believe that initiating change at one end of the pyramid will lead to changes in the other end too. The Indian State has included both these approaches in its paradigm of policies directed toward women empowerment. The former is evident in the State's adoption of a formal platform of affirmative action, positive discrimination and other deliberate efforts to facilitate political and social participation of the womenfolk while the latter reflects in the State's acceptance of a decentralised, participatory democracy wherein power has been transferred into the hands of the common people at the grassroots level through instruments like the 73rd and the 74th constitutional amendments and institutions like the panchayats and the municipalities.

Grassroots efforts pinpoint a group need and exert political pressure to correct the problem, assuming that such acts will ensure women's political equality and integration (into the political mainstream). This reiterates the need for the establishment of equality if a society wishes to be progressive. India after independence has embraced equality as a cardinal value against the background of elaborate, valued and clearly perceived inequalities (Marc Galanter, 1997). The concern and commitment of the Constitution of India towards achieving justice and equality, especially for the women, get reflected in its Preamble, Fundamental

Rights, Directive Principles of State Policy etc. the significance of the Preamble lies in that it acts as the key to open the minds of the readers to the essence of the Constitution and its goals and ideals. Article 14 ensures equality before law and Article 15 prohibits any discrimination on the basis of religion, race, sex, caste or place of birth. However, the policy of affirmative action by the State allows the government to take actions favouring women and other weaker sections of the society. Specific legislations like the 73rd and 74th amendments, central and state government schemes, reservation guaranteed to women in local decision making bodies etc. are instances of the programmes adopted by the Indian State, which are suggestive of the government's tilt towards bringing in women empowerment and emancipation. Unfortunately, one of the most important pieces of legislation, i.e., the Women's Reservation Bill, has emerged as a fiercely contested area and has yet to see the light of the day. The Parliament has not been able to amicably come to a settled opinion on the issue of women's reservation despite the bill being introduced several times on the floor of the legislative body.

Affirmative action or positive discrimination by the State is actually to compensate the disadvantaged sections of the society for the imposed backwardness that they were put in for long. Marc Galanter has used the term 'compensatory discrimination to mean 'reservation' in the context of upliftment of the disadvantaged sections of Indian population (Bipan Chandra, *et al.*, 2008). Reservation for backward communities can be traced back to 1921 when the Princely State of Mysore motioned in favour of preferential recruitment of backward sections. This was again instituted in the Madrad Presidency in 1927. The colonial government in 1943 instituted the system of reservation for the depressed castes (Sir Edward Gait, 2010).

3. Reservation for women in politics

Affirmative action or positive discrimination practised by the State aim at mitigating the discriminatory effects that prevail in the society against the socially weak and the backward. It comprises of conscious and concerted efforts by the state authorities and various public institutions in giving preferential treatment to certain sections of people based on some qualitative criteria like sex, caste etc. when it comes to distribution of public goods and services. It seeks to uplift the economic and social positions from a situation of backwardness. Thus, the goals of empowerment, redressal, emancipation and equality constitute the

rationality behind the policy of reservation. Anti-discrimination and protective measures act as incentives to mobilise political participation of all sections of the society, including the most backward and under privileged ones. The political education of the backward sections will be possible only when their access to decision making is guaranteed by the State as well as the society and when their representatives freely and fairly voice their needs and opinions in the legislative forum. This can be conducive towards tackling social discrimination and exploitation or in allocating much needed resources to previously neglected areas. The relevance of reservation is that it strives for equity of power, i.e. a fair distribution of power which is a basic, indeed fundamental requirement of democracy (Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, 2002). It tends to attack social disparities and asymmetric power sharing in the society and acts as a manifestation and practical revelation of the quest for gender equality in politics in the contemporary times. Despite being a contestable issue, it cannot be denied that the instrument of reservation carries in it the potential of encapsulating the weaker sex into the political sphere of the nation. The affirmative action is based on the conviction that participation in decision-making and governance would lead to better gender development; that the political empowerment of women will lead to better formulation of development; that it will accelerate social and national development policies and that it will bring about an alternative political culture. The Beijing Conference emphasises on the fact that the objectives of peace, equality, development and empowerment of women can't be achieved without realizing free and fair sharing of power equally with women. Reserved seats induce a compulsion into the system to provide space for women and other backward sections in the decision making process. It is argued that by improving the social and political conditions of the womenfolk, their positions in the household can be altered too. Herein lies the urgent need for providing reservation to women.

The present discursive nature of reservation policy in India is still revolving around the argument of 'merit' versus 'social discrimination' (Jagannath Ambagudia, 2005). It is noteworthy that social restructuring and delivering justice to minorities against a powerful majority have always invited acrimonious opposition and controversies in all societies. And when it comes to reserving seats for women in the legislative bodies, the supporters of the male dominion and status quo often cry foul and cite discrimination against

themselves. Patriarchy runs deep in the social fabric of India and the male majority have not yet been able to let go of the privileges and perks that they have been enjoying for so long. Hence, the controversy around the women's reservation bill doesn't seem to cease.

4. Participation of women in politics

Nowadays, development indices such as the Human Development Index and the Gender Development Index are devised in such a manner so as to capture the social, political and economic conditions of the women of the countries. Hence, such indices are reflective of the level of empowerment that the women enjoy. However, it can be noticed that many developing and under developed countries reflect poorly on the aspects of women's all round development. Hence, governments around the world have started resorting to Gender Empowerment Measures (GEM) and have devised exclusive plans, programmes, legislations and policies for enhancing the welfare, protection and development of the womenfolk. Internationally this has led to the UN resolutions such as the CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, Millennium Development goals and others (D Sundar Ram, 2010). Many countries around the world have found political reservation in favour of women to be a viable means of increasing women's participation in their political spheres. This was done either through action by the State or through quota in political parties. In the context of India, since the onus of creating a welfare state lies upon the State itself, affirmative action is quite relevant and significant. Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen argue that achieving greater equity in Indian society depends crucially on political action and the practice of democracy. The efficacy of political action in the reversal of disempowerment cannot be denied. Thus, the State should create a greater degree of obligations and deliberate institutions through which political representation of women can be increased, and which includes avenues like reserving seats for women in decision making bodies, introduction of equal voting rights etc. Such formal provisions compel the system to absorb and integrate equal participation and fair representation of women in politics.

Despite the women constituting half the population of the world, they are still a minority when it comes to sharing of power or acquisition of political positions. In India, the women have been grossly under-represented in political entities. It is to be lamented that Indian political institutions have seen such a low record of female representation. The unfortunate absence of women from the political scenario has,

indeed, cast shadows on the efficacy of prevalent methods of recognising the restricting conditions and the means of eliminating them. Proponents of women reservation believe that women might not be able to really formulate the women interests and needs unless they are drawn into the political process (Sushma Srivasrava, 2008). Including women in the decision making process will lead to optimum utilisation of natural and human resources, will tap the idle potential of the country, will include better visions pertaining to the future and will enhance the accuracy of implementable policies. This is especially so at a time when the resources are becoming scarcer following the adoption of Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) and gradual state withdrawal from the public sector (Prabhat Dutta and Payal Sen, 2009). Granting of power in the hands of the women is necessary because it is only by staying in positions of authority that one can initiate real changes and practically address genuine problems. It enables the women, who are in a disadvantageous position, to have a stake in the rules of the game and influence material decisions. It is also taken to be a normative ingredient of offering compensation to the women for their wrongful subjugation and marginalisation in the society. Ultimately releasing the women from their imposed powerlessness is essentially a form of challenging the patriarchal hierarchies and the existing power pyramid. The 'Committee on the Status of Women in India' (1974) came out with one of the foremost political deliberations in India regarding the issues of women's participation and representation in its report titled "Towards Equality" (1976). It introduced the notion of reservation for women in political bodies (35 percent) in India, which was, of course, not accepted by the government. Eventually, the National Perspective Plan for Women (1998-2000) also proposed a 30 percent quota for the women in local government bodies. Consensus on this suggestion could be built up around 1992 which resulted in the Constitution (73rd and 74th Amendment) Acts.

The impact of reservation as brought in by the 73rd and the 74th amendments have attracted a great number of women into the local self-governance system. It has increased the numerical strength of the women in the grassroots levels of political bodies by leaps and bounds. The assurances of electing women and also reserving the posts of Chairpersons in local institutions have acted as a great boon for the Indian society. The mandatory provisions on women reservation thereby have brought hundreds of women

to enter the election fray, learn their tasks on hand, sustain themselves in politics if they wish to, and move upward if they can. About a million women entered the first election of panchayats after the enactment of the 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India. About 40 percent of the elected women represented the marginalised sections (Nupur Tiwari, 2008). Such a huge number of female entrants into politics would not have been a reality had reservation not been introduced by the government, it set into motion the wheels of a veritable civil revolution that involved and affected such a vast number of women post-independence. It has mobilised the latent potential of half of our human resource and has tapped into vast reservoirs of skills, knowledge and wisdom of the womenfolk so as to open the doors to an alternative system of democratic governance. It has challenged status quo and brought into the forefront alternate realities about the notions concerning women. Presently, there are approximately 260,000 panchayat representatives in India, out of which around 75,000 are women (Anupam Hazra, 2011). Reservation was successful in giving the world the largest number of female representatives, in the form of the 75,000 elected women in India. The silver lining about this fact is that the rural women have come forward to participate in the local level decision making process and rightfully claim their positions and powers. This entry of the women stakeholders will be impacting the gender equity balance in our society in a large way.

5. PRIs as a means to women empowerment

PRIs can be said to be the torch-bearers of the local self-governance system in India. It is a true and effective manifestation of decentralisation of the political system as it involves people at the base levels. It unites and integrates the rural communities of the population and enables them to decide for themselves – a true means of empowerment and securing social equity. PRIs can directly influence and alter the status of women in the Indian society, and can transform the social relations at the grassroots level. Therefore, PRIs occupy a significant place in the functioning of the Indian polity. They act as the basic social and political construct upon which the vast edifice of the Indian democracy is set. If they are to be removed or neglected, it would result in the breakdown of the entire nation. Dreze and Sen argue that these democratic institutions and its practice are vital means to assess the achievements and future potentials of Indian democracy. They provide opportunities for achieving democratic ideals, like transfer of power through

decentralisation, people's participation, representation of different sections of the society etc. The PRIs are entities that empower the rural women and educate the people about managing their financial and economic resources, the mechanism of public administration, the significance of participatory democracy, the aims and objectives of representation, their rights and entitlements etc. This essentially leads to elevation of confidence and enhancement of self-esteem, especially among the women, and which is vital to transforming a state of powerlessness to one of empowerment and consciousness. The PRIs are also polishing grounds for making people ready for national politics. They are institutions that are the gateways to understanding what a modern democracy means and accepting the ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity in a society that has remained hugely backward and afflicted with caste, gender and communal segregations.

Many of the women representatives in the PRIs are first time entrants. They are women who have seen and exercised power and authority for the first time in their lives. The PRIs act as avenues where the women can practically experience the 'learning by doing' process and acquire an understanding of the working of the Indian democracy. This sometimes can be combined with the inspirational examples set by influential women and other role models. PRIs provide women the avenues of 'learning by doing' which also include the influence of role models (e.g., of a successful female President), the spread of various skills involved in local governance (e.g., the ability to hold orderly meetings or to deal with the state bureaucracy), the evolution of a culture of political participation, the creation of new forms of social mobilization, and even changes in public perceptions of the need for as well as scope for foundational change. The local governments often proffer the women an opportunity to realise their skills and potentials beyond the confines of their households. Unfortunately, the importance of PRIs was paid heed to by the Indian governments at a quite late stage. Although traditional panchayats were a part of the Indian polity for centuries, the institution of panchayats lacked the constitutional basis, i.e., it wasn't constitutionally incorporated as a part of our democracy until the 73rd amendment was made in 1992. Half-hearted appointments of Commissions or undertaking of discourses regarding panchayats reflected the negligence and downplaying of their significance, right from our constitution makers to successive governments post-independence. The

notions of local self-governments and panchayats, the ideals that freedom fighters like Mahatma Gandhi stood for and cherished, did not even find mention in the initial draft of the Constitution. According to L. M. Singhvi, “Finally, as a compromise, the Constituent Assembly settled for the inclusion of a lacklustre provision on village panchayats in an awkward nook and an obscure corner of the Constitution, the Directive Principles of State Policy, which are at best unenforceable guidelines in the governance of the country” (N.N Vohra and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 2002).

Neglecting the institution of panchayats was like minimising the opinion of the Mahatma himself. Gandhiji envisaged a self-sufficient country with a strong rural self-governance. He believed that a democracy functioned best when the people were in control of their own decisions and resources. It was he who ardently carried forward the concept of ‘gram-swaraj’ as the right of every Indian. By putting the panchayats in the Directive Principles of State Policy, the framers of the Constitution created confusion as

Article 40 merely lays down, “The State shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government” – which meant that the Constitution was silent on the exact form that local government institutions were to take. This was to allow the states the flexibility to devise forms most suited to their needs. Although the Constitution rendered village panchayats as a subject of the state’s wisdom, leniency and the lack of enforceability ultimately translated into politicization of the issue. It was only after the enactment of the 73rd amendment that supporting panchayats and holding timely elections became the state’s legal liability.

Thus, the Constitution’s 73rd Amendment Act has created considerable space for women’s political participation and paved way for their representation in the decision-making at the grassroots politics. The Act lays a strong foundation for women’s participation in decision-making at the local level and proves instrumental in promoting women’s political empowerment.

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