
GENDER POLITICS- POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS

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INTRODUCTION

“For me a better Democracy is a Democracy where Women do not only have the Right to Vote, but to be elected.”

- ***Michelle Bachelet, Former Head of UN.***

There are four important debates in the narrative on the question of political participation of women both at the global level as well as in India. One debate tries look at the women's participation as part of "empowering women" particularly as political categories. Second debate tries to argue that voting rights or suffrage will remain as symbolism or "political tokenism" rather than actualizing participation in traditional societies such as India, Iran etc and the third debate looks at suffrage as essential component for creating egalitarian society and final debate argue that political participation especially through "quota" or reservation not necessarily leads to social emancipation of women, as women are still without property rights and that gender bias still operates at the large level. In fact women's participation has given rise to different discourses or perspectives too. One of the perspectives is known as Incrementalist Perspective. According to this discourse gender equality develops gradually, step wise and as a concerted effort where state intervention may assist in moving equality in the high direction. Although this particular discourse has been contested by large number of women's movement on the ground that such a trend would definitely go against the spirit of achieving gender equality in short-span- it might take hundreds of years to achieve gender equality in politics. In fact in India Increment list Discourse is dominating the political discourse.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN EARLY INDIAN SOCIETY

The sociologists have described the women by propounding different perceptions. In India, the history speaks that the women are considered as a divine force, but the multi-cultured Indian society placed the women at different positions. Thus, there is no uniform status of women in the Indian society. However, civilization showed the overall development of women's position. The Indian philosophy poses the women with dual character. On the one hand, she is considered fertile, patient and benevolent but on the other hand, she is considered aggressor and represents 'shakti.' Thus the various position and status of women during different era are discussed below.

Vedic Period- Undoubtedly, *the position of women during the Vedic period was glorious on account of freedom and equality.* During this period, the women participated in every walk of life. Women studied in Gurukuls and enjoyed liberty in every sphere. The great women like Apala, Visvara, Yamini, Gargi and Ghosa stole the lime-light and became front runners in society. They acquired efficiency in art, music and even warfare. In Upanishad, the wife has been regarded as a true companion of husband. The wife has been blessed to live as a queen in the husband's house in Rig-Veda. This shows the high status of women. The wife has been called the root of prosperity, enjoyment and Dharma in Mahabharata. The man was not religiously competent to perform religious duties without his wife. There was absence of the pardhah system and right to select life partners was present. However, the system of polygamy and dowry was not only prevalent in the ruling class. There was no prohibition in

the remarriage of the widow and also no discrimination between a boy and girl. As a result, girls were permitted to undergo thread ceremony.

Post-Vedic Period- During the post Vedic period, the women had suffered drastic hardships and restrictions as propounded by Manu. He *attempted to set up male dominated society by increasing the authority of man.*

The birth of a girl child was treated as a disaster for the family. Girls were denied access to education. Girls were not allowed to undergo thread ceremony.

During this period, pre-puberty marriage system was originated, thus the marriageable age of girls was lowered to 9 or 10 years.

Medieval period- The women's position was further degraded during the medieval period with invasions of India by Alexander and the Huns. Society observed security threats with invading soldiers roaming countryside; consequently, women were placed behind the veil. Women were deprived of the social evils like child marriage, Sati, Female infanticide mushroomed extensively. Further, social curse like dowry had become inevitable particularly in Rajasthan.

HISTORY OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA

The root to the participation of women in politics can be traced back 19th century, reform movement. The early 19th century social reforms and educational programmes initiated by various social reformers dealt with the social evils relevant in the society. *The social reform movement has been regarded as a key to the intellectual processes that went into the making of modern India.* They thought that social change could be initiated by educating women and bringing progressive legislation. Social evils can be eradicated by raising consciousness and making people aware of the injustice done to women.

Social reformers like Rajaram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahadeva Govinda Ranade, Behramji Malabari raised their voices against the prevailing practices and social customs subjugating women. Their efforts rallied around issues affecting women's life adversely such as the practice of sati, female infanticide, plight of widows, child marriage, polygamy etc. Rajaram Mohan Roy championed the ban on the practice of sati.

The campaign resulted in the governmental resolution of 1829, banning the practice of sati. Thus, the various revolutions and protests for the equal rights of women led to the gradual empowerment of women in our society. *Suffrage is one such empowerment and acted as the initial step stone for the betterment of women's rights.* The following table represents the year wise attainment of voting rights of women in various nations.

Table.1. Attainment of women's rights in various nations

Country	Year
Australia	1902
Finland	1906
Norway	1913
Denmark	1915
Soviet Russia	1917
America	1918
England	1928
France	1944
Syria	1971
India	1950

Source: Samvedi, published by DEEDS, Mangalore

Constitutional Provisions

The constitution of India, one of the greatest documents ever produced came into force in the year 1950 which *guarantees justice, liberty and equality to all citizens.*

The preamble of the constitution of India ensures to secure all its citizens justice, social, economic and political liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith, and to worship, *equality of status and opportunity* and to promote among them fraternity assuring the dignity of individual and the unity of nation.

Fundamental Rights

Article 14 guarantees equality before law and equal protection of law within the territory of India. This article stands for absence of any discrimination by law or in their administration.

Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth. It is a guarantee against every form of discrimination. According to article 15(3), nothing shall prevent the state from making special provisions for the benefit women and children.

Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity for all citizens in matter relating to employment or appointment to any office under state. Secondly no citizen shall, on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, decent, place of birth residence or nay of them, ne eligible for or discriminated against in respect of any employment or office under the state.

Directive Principles of State Policy

Article 39-a) guarantees right to an adequate means of livelihood for all citizen.

Article 51-A clause (e) says that it shall be the duty of every citizen of India- to promote harmony and spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India, transcending religious, linguistic and religious or sectional diversities, to renounces practice derogatory to the dignity of women.

The **73rd constitutional amendment** has added the following articles to the constitution providing reservation for women in Panchayat Raj Institutions.

Article 243-D (2) states that not less than 1/3 of the seats reserved under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to S.C or as the case may be S.T.

Article 243-D (3) extends political reservation to women not less than 1/3 of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats shall be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a panchayat.

Article 243- D (4) extends reservations to elected offices as well. The office of the chairpersons in the panchayats or any other level shall be reserved S.C and the S.T and women in such a manner as legislature of a state may, by law provide.

In spite of such provisions in the constitution, the decades following independence witnessed a decline in the women's participation in politics. These rights appeared illusionary and there was a shift from the aims of the constitution. Gap started widening in all political spheres.

Article 325 and 326 guarantees political equality, equality right to participate in political activity and right to vote. Politics proved to be very inhospitable terrain for women and continues to be male domain where entry of women is severely restricted. Representation of women in parliament and state assemblies remain at a very low level. Their representation is 10.8% in parliament.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN POLITICS IN THE MODERN ERA

The role of women in the field of administration has been poor right from the ancient times. Women were always considered to be insufficient to rule. In order to change this view, and to bring about a change in such perception of the society, the Indian Constitution was framed with equality as its one of the basic principles. Those constitutional principles supporting women and ensuring their equal status in the field of politics were discussed above. But the implementations of those laws are fragile. Though, legislative assurance has been given to women to achieve their status of equality, still they have to face several obstacles to reach their goals.

Where are the Women? *The political power is still male domain in India.* Gender equality leading to deprivation of power among women continues to be a political reality in India today. Women are perpetually excluded from decision making at every step of the ladder, starting from the household to the top layer of policy making.

. The following table represents the Women's participation in the Parliament of India for the past decades.

Table.2. Women's participation in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha

	Lok Sabha			Rajya Sabha		
Year	No. of Seats	No. of Women MPs	% of Women MPs	No. of seats	No. of Women MPs	% of Women MPs
1952	499	22	4.41	219	16	7.31
1957	500	27	5.4	237	18	7.59
1962	503	34	6.76	238	18	7.56
1967	523	31	5.93	240	20	8.33
1971	521	22	4.22	243	17	7
1977	544	19	3.49	244	25	10.25
1980	544	28	5.15	244	24	9.84
1984	544	44	8.09	244	28	11.48
1989	517	27	5.22	245	24	9.8
1991	544	39	7.17	245	38	15.51
1996	543	39	7.18	223	19	8.52
1998	543	43	7.92	245	15	6.12
1999	543	49	9.02	245	19	7.76
2004	543	45	8.28	245	DNA	DNA
2009	543	59	10.86	245	22	8.98
2014	543	61	11.23	241	28	11.62
Average	530	35	6.59	240.00	21	9

Source: Election Commission of India's website (www.eci.gov.in)

Although the constitution of India attempts to remove gender inequalities by interdicting discrimination based on sex and class, and ensuring fundamental rights for all the citizens, women still have only *de jure* rather than *de facto* access to these rights.

There is no denying fact that greater participation of women in the political process would be a pre-condition for their economic and social emancipation. However, even though a significantly large number of women's suffrage in the country is present, yet only a few of them assume the reins of power.

Paradoxically, though women have held the posts of President and Prime Minister as well as Chief Minister of various states in India, the country *ranks 20th from the bottom in terms of representation of women in parliament, as per the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2012.* The Women's Reservation Bill (108th amendment) has also been introduced in the National Parliament to reserve 33% of the Lok Sabha seats for women. *It is believed that by increasing the number of women in national government may not guarantee an impact on governance.* A critical mass of women in power can bring about transformation in leadership

A heartening outcome of the reservation bill is the subsequent rise in political participation by women, which went up from 4-5 % to 25-40% among women, and gave millions of women the opportunity to serve as leaders in local government. A few states like Odisha established reservations even before the 73rd amendment and they had 28,069 women elected in 1992 and 28,595 women in 1997. The robust health of India's democracy is also reflected in the

increasingly large turnouts of women voters in progressive elections at both the national and state levels in the country. In the 2012 elections of Legislative Assemblies, for instance, Uttar Pradesh reported a turnout of 58.82 to 60.29 per cent of the female voters.

The turnout of women *during India's 2014 parliamentary general elections was 65.63%, only marginally less than the male turnout of 67.09%*. In 16 out of 29 states of India, more women voted than men. This increased female participation was observed in both the rich and poor states in the country. The Assembly Elections in four states and one Union Territory bear witness to this fact, more resoundingly than even in the past.

Despite the remarkable showing by the two Chief Ministers in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu in those elections, Mamta Banerjee and Jayalalitha, respectively, there was no significant rise in the number of women MLA's in any of the five Assemblies, which had a female strength of merely *81 out of the total number of 823 MLA's, representing less than 10% of the total legislators*. This includes 8 women out of 126 MLA's in Assam, 21 out of 234 in Tamil Nadu, 40 out of 293 in West Bengal, 8 out of 140 in Kerala, and 4 out of 30 in Puducherry.

Overall analysis of the Women's Participation in Politics in India

The Times of India has reported that women of India have poor representation of only 11% in Lok Sabha and 10.06% in the Rajya Sabha, making *India 108th among 188 countries covered in the annual analysis on statistics of women members of parliament (MPs)* conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union- IPU. The global average of women in parliaments as of November 2013 stood at 21.3%, a slight increase over the numbers in the immediately preceding two years (20.3% and 19.5%). The IPU is an international organization of parliaments and works for the establishment of representative democracies. India fared poorly even when compared with her immediate neighbours. Here, Nepal, ranked at 24, led the pack, followed by China (55) and Pakistan (66).

The Centre for Social Research Mr. Amitabh Kumar stated,

"The patriarchal hereditary nature of Indian politics requires intervention at many levels and in many forms. A 33% reservation, which is the minimum mass required, will be one of the most significant changes in helping women attain their right to participate in Indian democracy not just as voters but also as leaders."

The Secretary General of Inter Parliamentary Union, Mr. Anders B Johnsson stated,

"Although quotas remain contentious in some parts of the world, they remain as a key to progress on a fundamental component of democracy- gender parity in political representation."

Quotas need to be ambitious and women candidates should be placed in winnable positions on party lists, the IPU said. In the Indian Scenario the ratio of women candidates winning their contested is not optimal.

Obstacles faced by Women in Politics in India

1. **Sexual Violence-** Martha Nussbaum, an American Philosopher highlighted a significant barrier to women's capability of participating in politics to be the threat of violence; Sexual Violence. She has commented as follows,

"In the larger society, violence and the threat of violence affect many women's ability to participate actively in many forms of social and political relationship, to speak in public, to be recognised as dignified beings whose worth is equal to that of others."

Self-confidence is likely to increase participation among Indian Women, specifically in running election.

2. **Discrimination-** Although the Constitution of India removed gender equalities among caste and gender, discrimination contributes to be a widespread barrier to women's political participation. *The 2012 study shows that 3,000 Indian women found the barriers in participation, specifically in running for political office*, in the form of illiteracy, work burdens, discriminatory attributes towards women as leaders.

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- 3. Illiteracy-** India has one of the largest illiterate populations. In January 2014, the United Nations reported that literacy among Indian women is 53.7%, which is much lower than literacy among men reported at 75.3%. Illiteracy limits the ability of women to understand the political system and issues.

Findings and Analysis, Suggestions and Conclusion

Findings and Analysis

1. The status of women was not uniform in all the periods. It deviated from one period to another.
2. The Revolutions and Protests made by various leaders for the equality of women, resulted in the enshrinement of the concept of Equality in the Preamble and Article-15 of the Constitution of India.
3. Though the legislature impeded the concept of equality for women in the field of politics and administration, women yet has to face several hurdles and discrimination in society while attributing for politics.

Suggestions

1. The society has to stop treating the women as inferior to men and restricting them within households. The society has to support women who show interest in politics or any other field.
2. The Government can bring about an effective implementation of the laws in order to ensure Gender Equality.
3. The Education of Women which is still lacking in terms of ratio, comparing to the education of men has to be equalised, as education forms the basis to compete in the field of Politics or any other fields.

Conclusion

In a male dominated society like India, Women to achieve the status of Domain and to rule over a society, was always considered as a taboo or as a major obstacle. Starting from the Monarchical form of Government to the present Democratic, Federal or other forms of Government, very few women like Jhansi Rani Lakshmi Bai, Margaret Thatcher, Smt. Jayalalitha etc have been able to conquer their own heights in history. Rest of the women were restricted within their household and opportunities. The increase in the number of women in legislature definitely will not bring overnight changes in the status of women. The Reservations or Quotas brought quantitative changes, which facilitated women to be represented in local governments and deserved to be hailed as major achievement in the empowerment of women. Success stories of women in local governments indicate the qualitative changes that are coming forth.

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