

Research Paper

Political Science



Women's Empowerment and Indian Elections

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the issue of Women's Empowerment and Indian Elections. The Indian women were given their political right along with independence. In the USA, the women were given the right to vote only in 1920 after decades of struggle. In the UK, the women were given the right to vote although at the deferred and discriminatory age of 30 years under the Representation of the People Act, 1918. Parity between the sexes were finally attained by the representation of the People Act, 1928 which reduced the female voting age to 21 year. In India, the national movement and the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi were the two major catalysts which relentlessly worked for the emancipation of women. In Indian democratic system, participation of women in politics has to be viewed at the levels of acquisition and exercise of power and exercise of rights.

Keywords : Elections, politics woman politician, media, newspaper coverage, representation.

Introduction

"Women empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society including participation in the decision making process and access to power are fundamental for the advancement of equality, development and peace". -Beijing Declaration

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of his/her country. The United Nations Economic and Social Council endorsed a target of 30 per cent women in all levels of decision-making by 1995. In spite of this, globally women constitute only 10 per cent of legislative bodies and less in Parliamentary positions. Women's participation in the political process is critical both to the strengthening of democratic traditions and to their struggle against oppression. Political activism for women, as for other underprivileged groups, is integral to social transformation. Oppositional politics by itself will define effectively the limitations and constraints of existing political process, and in the process outline alternative democratic structures that will transform existing social relations.

In India, the post-independence period has seen many positive steps to improve the socio-economic status of women. Women themselves have become keenly aware of their rights and are spearheading movements across the country against all sorts of social evils. This consciousness is largely due to an increase in women's literacy although they have miles and miles to go. The most significant landmark in the journey is the historic 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts, 1992 by the centre and its ratification by the states. These Constitution Amendment Acts reserved one-third seats for women in the Panchayati Raj and Municipal bodies. This not only bestowed a right of participation of women in the decision-making process, both at the rural and urban local bodies of the country but also helped to facilitate the emergence of a cadre of young and talented leadership for active participation in the political process. In this historical context an attempt has been made here to examine the multi-dimensional facets of the participation of women in Indian politics.

Women's Empowerment in India

Since the older times, women have been treated as second rate citizens of all across the globe. The situation is almost the same everywhere-irrespective of the developed country or the developing country-caste, community, colour or creed a position which is comparable in many ways, with that of

racial minorities. Women have been relegated to secondary position despite the fact that they numerically constitute about half the world population today.

This situation has caused immense loss to their self-dignity as human beings and also their independent entities, associated with men, apart from other matter, in context with intellectual and professional capability.

In the very beginning of civilization, women enjoyed a respectable position in society-at par with men. They actively participated in social, religious affairs as well as in warfare. The social, religious ceremonies were considered incomplete unless women participated in them. However, it was their physical constitution which acted as hurdles on the way to doing their various different difficult tasks.

Gradually, they became dependent on men for food, protection for their other necessities. It was due to the strong built-up of men they risked their lives in course of hunting and food collection. It is really ironical that superiority is not accorded to the fair sex who are responsible for carrying forward lives on this planet but to men who have muscle power with the help of which they can subjugate others.

Later, woman became the epitome of procreation, and was very often associated and identified with Earth, which supported lives with all her resources. This thought inspired in men a feeling of respect and regard which was reflected in their worship of women as goddesses. Despite this elevated position that she enjoyed, and are still enjoying in the form of being worshipped as goddesses Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, Saraswati, etc. However, a woman is fated to be subjected, owned, and exploited like the very nature, whose magical fertility she embodies.

During the course of social development, the position of women also changed. When society was formed, patriarchy was established. Gradually, males became dominant in society. They were to write the codes for all times and obviously women were given a subordinate position. A prominent feature of hegemonic ideologies is the projection of the dominant viewpoint as universally true.

Patriarchy, as an ideological assumption, works on the same principle. And, yet, even in ages of strict dominance by males, society has thrown up women of calibre, who could match,

even surpass, the skills of men. They made great progress in various fields of life and gained significant achievements as teachers, doctors, engineers, scientists, explorers, soldiers and pilots. This achievement is really plausible because they have been achieved in a highly adverse situation and at the cost of severe social criticism, indeed even ostracism.

The need for women's empowerment arises from the subordinate position they have been accorded for a long time. The empowerment has been felt as a tool to bring about changes in their socio-economic condition. It has been felt on the part of nation as well as individual that no society can progress till women, a major constituent of society, lag behind.

Empowerment of women needs to begin with her participation in different spheres of life. Education is a great determinant in this regard. To achieve empowerment women have to be educated to be aware of their rights and privileges in a modern society. It is education which can bring about awareness in them related to their social status, injustice and differentiation meted out to them. Besides, economic independence is a major factor which can contribute in empowering women. India in the very beginning realised this need.

The architect of Indian Constitution was of the opinion that unless and until women are empowered, nothing was going to bring about any change in their destiny. At that time, the women, in the name of sanskaras were tied up with the bondage of superstitions, which they had to carry till the last breath of their lives. They were considered just a matter of joy and a source of amusement. She was, according to the Hindu Shashtra, the bonded slave of her father when she was young, to her husband when she was middle-aged and to her son when a mother. Of course, all the epigrams, aphorisms, proverbs, platitudes and truisms have been naked truth about the stature of women in India.

It does not mean that efforts have not been made to bring dignity in the life of women. There has been a long tradition of social reforms by our saints and social reformers which include: Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahadev Govind Ranade, and Jyotiba Phule, to name a few, who tried their best to bring changes in the life of women.

Their efforts, however, bore fruit to some extent, but did not make too much difference to the lots of the masses. In this direction, Dr. Ambedkar tried to break down the barriers in the way of advancement of women in India. He laid down the foundation of concrete and sincere efforts by codifying the Common Civil Code for the Hindus and the principle is capable of extension to other sections of the Indian society. Besides, he also made provision in the Constitution to ensure a dignified social status to women. He, by codifying Hindu Law in respect of marriage, divorce and succession rationalised and restored the dignity of women.

In addition to this, the Sharda Act is also worth mentioning. It has set the seal of authority upon the piece of social reforms, which the heads of orthodoxy were imposing and impending. The Hindu Code Bill, which covers issues such as right to property, order of succession to property, maintenance, marriage, divorce, adoption, minority and guardianship, constitutes part of social engineering via law. Needless to say, it was a revolutionary measure.

It was really a first step towards the recognition and empowerment of women in India. This gives a woman right to property, which undoubtedly strengthens her social position. Despite all these political measures, women's empowerment remains a distant dream in India. In fact, political empowerment is a key to development in this society. It is a must for an all-around development of women. It is the need of the hour to ensure her participation in the decision-making at home, in community and at the national level. It is for the fulfillment of this need that the Women's Reservation Bill was introduced in the Parliament by the BJP Government. But since then, ruling parties changed in power but the Bill could not see the light of the day.

The political parties do not seem to be honest in their perspectives. But before political empowerment, we must concentrate on imparting social education because without academic and social education, the political empowerment has failed to bring desired result as we have seen in case of 33 per cent reservation in local bodies ensured by the historic 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments. The uneducated women are quite unaware of their rights and privileges and are therefore subject to exploitation at the hands of government machinery, as well by family members.

Therefore, our efforts should be directed towards the all-around development of each and every section of Indian women, not confining the benefit to a particular section of women in society, by giving them their due share. It is a must to protect their chastity, modesty and dignity and ensure their dignified position in society. Without removing social stigma, enduring progress and development could not be achieved. For this, the governmental and non-governmental organizations including media should come forward and play an active role in creating awareness in society.

The task is not too difficult to achieve. The honesty and sincerity on the part of those involved is a must. If the lots of women change, definitely it will have a positive impact on society. Hence, the women's empowerment is the need of the hour.

Methodology

The elections are significant, since 1952 during the year 2009, the highest numbers (59) of women candidates were elected. To understand the approach of the Indian press towards women politicians in India, I chose two newspapers, 'The Times of India,' Bangalore edition and 'The Bangalore Mirror,' as samples. The dates were, from March 3rd 2009, the date of announcement of election until 21st May, a little after the announcement of results and preliminary formation of government. I have chosen top five men and women politicians after taking a stock of the news reports published about them within the time period. I have looked into the number of articles published about men as compared to women. I have also looked at certain representative articles about some important woman politicians published during this time period and analysed how they are presented in the press.

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN LEGISLATURE :

India became independent in the year 1947. In all the elections held since independence, women had the voting rights. Women play a dual role in politics – as voters and political representatives. On the voting front, though adult franchise was granted in 1937, it was the progressive spirit that pervaded the making of the constitution that made it a reality. The Constitution of India guarantees equal rights to men and women as voters and citizens. Generally, in India, registration and participation of women as contestants is less than that of men (see Table).

Since Independence, due to exercise of their franchise, Indian women have been exposed to the political processes and are showing increasing awareness about not only lack of rights but also their utility. A majority of illiterate rural women are also politically sensitive and aware of the various issues confronting them. Women get easily mobilized in the political processes by the political parties who approach women very often for party issues and for short-term goals by winning elections, but not for long-term goals of bringing about social changes and gender equality in political power-sharing. In all the elections held since independence, women had the voting rights. Due to the paternalistic family and male dominated political structures which do not provide space for women in decision-making bodies, women constituted 3.1% of the total contestants in 1996 election and did not occupy more than 6.10% of the total seats in the state legislative assemblies and Parliament. The number of women contestants in Parliamentary elections has not increased significantly over the years.

Political parties are still reluctant to field women candidates at national level. In the early days of the Indian republic; the number of women representatives was a mere 22, which was a lowly 4.4% of the total seats in the Lok Sabha. The sixth Loksabha in the year 1977 saw an all time low of

just 19 woman representatives. The twelfth Lok Sabha had 44 women i.e. 8.8% of the total.

The pattern of participation by women in the national elections is provided in the following Table-1.

TABLE - 1
PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN NATIONAL ELECTIONS

Year	Voting% of men	Voting% of women	Total Seats Contested by women	Seats won by women	% seats won of contested seats	Total Seats	% of women members
1952	53	37.1	51	23	45.09	499	4.40
1957	56	38.77	70	27	38.57	500	5.40
1962	62.10	46.63	68	35	51.47	503	6.70
1967	66.70	55.48	66	31	48.43	523	5.90
1971	69.70	49.15	86	22	27.50	521	4.20
1977	65.62	54.96	70	19	25.70	544	3.40
1980	57.69	51.22	142	28	19.70	544	5.14
1984	63.61	68.17	421	159	28.30	544	7.90
1989	70.90	43.90	189	28	14.80	525	5.30
1991	52.56	47.42	307	33	10.75	503	6.60

Source: PIB, Government of India, 1998.

It can be perceived that though the voting percentage of women is increasing with the highest of 68.1% in 1984, the number of women in the Parliament is quite less. The percentage of seats won against the seats contested is showing a declining trend. However, voting for women in all tiers of Government has always been a feature of the Indian polity since 1947. This implies that women play the role of Spectator and not of active members of the decision making process. The trend has not changed even in the last five elections when the government has undertaken quite a lot of developmental and welfare schemes for women.

TABLE - 2
WOMEN IN LOK SABHA

Year	No of total seats	No of women contestants	No of women elected
1991	524	326	37
1996	543	599	40
1998	543	274	43
1999	543	284	49
2004	543	355	45
2009	543	-	61

Source: Election Commission of India

A recent "Times of India" report (February 1998) corroborates that "domestic responsibilities, lack of financial clout, rising criminalization of politics and the threat of character assassination" are making it increasingly difficult for women to be part of the political framework. Moreover, women politicians point out that even within the political parties, women are rarely found in leadership positions. In fact, "women candidates are usually fielded from 'losing' constituencies where the party does not want to 'waste' a male candidate

Indian women had begun to appear on the national scene in public and political activity (Table-2). Women were not only being accepted in public activity but were organizing themselves to fight for their rights in different walks of life. Though women constitute nearly half of the population of the country, it was only after Independence that efforts were made to promote women's participation in public life and that too can not be termed adequate. Though the Constitution of India provides for the Government to make special provisions to safeguard the interests of women as detailed in Article 15 (3) and Article 39, it has not made any provision for reservation for women in respect of jobs and political offices. However the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act mandated reservation of one-third seats in the

village, block, districts, municipal elected bodies in India. As a consequence, women had not advanced much politically and economically. From the records available of the past 50 years, since the independence, it is seen that the strength of women in the political field as reflected in State legislatures remained at an average of 3 % to 5% of those elected. At the level of Parliament, the position of women members has varied between 5 to 7%.

TABLE - 3
WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT

At all levels (%)	At Ministerial levels (%)	At Sub – Ministerial levels (%)
5.8	3.2	6.2

It is seen that women in large numbers have come out against atrocities on women, in defence of their traditional control over crucial resources, water, forests, and land, mass literacy drives and other issues. They are also coming out in large numbers over ecological degradation, price rise or protests against police repression, etc. While there is the increased participation in grass root political movements, it is not getting translated into a growing share of women in the formal political structure of the country. Amongst the several reasons for such a situation is the growing money power and muscle power required to contest even the smallest of elections in India, the intimidation, violence and slander that a woman candidate has to face combined with the traditional male domination that seeks to keep her indoors. Narrow electoral arithmetic and the necessity of fielding a winning candidate makes most political parties shy away from fielding more than a token number of women candidates. And if they are fielded at all, kinship and affinity factors play a major role. It is very common to observe that the relatives of politicians are promoted and supported to emerge as politicians. Increasingly, women have stood for elections and got elected as members of State Legislative Assemblies and the Parliament. However, at the national level there is only one woman Cabinet Minister and 8 Ministers of State in a Cabinet of 70. There is only one woman Governor and one woman Chief Minister.

TABLE - 4
WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN THE RAJYA SABHA (UPPER HOUSE)

Year	Total seats	No. of Women	Percentage
1952	219	16	7.3
1957	237	18	7.6
1962	238	18	7.6
1967	240	20	8.3
1971	243	17	7.0
1977	244	25	10.2

1980	244	24	9.8
1985	244	28	11.4
1990	245	24	9.7
1991	245	38	15.5
1992	245	17	6.9
1994	245	20	8.1
1996	245	18	7.3
1997	245	18	7.3
1998	245	18	7.3

Source : Statistical Abstracts, 1998.

Some studies of Parliamentary participation indicate that women members participate more actively in 'women's issues' – health, welfare, atrocities against women, crimes like dowry and violations of human rights. This participation is confined to the more articulate women. In issues such as defence, finance, politics, etc. their participation is relatively limited. The following table shows women's representation in selected State Legislatures. The situation it appears has not improved much since the 1950s (Table-4)

TABLE - 5
WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN SELECTED STATE LEGISLATURES

State	Year	Total	Women
Assam	1996	122	6
Haryana	1999	90	4
J & K	1996	87	2
Himachal Pradesh	1998	68	6
Gujarat	1998	182	4
Kerala	1996	140	13
Meghalaya	1998	60	3
Punjab	1997	117	7
Pondicherry	1996	30	1
Delhi	1998	70	9
Nagaland	1998	60	0
Madhya Pradesh	1998	320	26
Tamil Nadu	1996	234	9
Tripura	1998	60	2
Uttar Pradesh	1996	424	20
West Bengal	1996	294	20
Bihar	1999	324	19
Maharashtra	1995	288	11
Arunachal Pradesh	1995	60	1
Manipur	1999	60	1
Orissa	1999	147	13
Rajasthan	1998	200	14

Source: Election Commission of India.

Analysis of trends of women's participation to contest elections to the State Legislatures indicate that there is a gender discrimination which is responsible for poor representation of women in India. Women's role in decision making is one of the most important questions for consideration in the movement for their empowerment. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1992) to the Indian Constitution have served as a major break through towards ensuring women's equal access and increased participation in political power structures. This Amendment provided for reservation of one third of seats for women at level of local

governance in urban areas. There is also a one-third reservation for women for posts of chairpersons of these local bodies. This amendment has initiated a powerful strategy of affirmative action for providing the structural framework for women's participation in political decision-making and provided an opportunity to bring women to be forefront and centre of city development and develop new grass-root level leadership (Table-5)

Powerful women in Indian elections

Mamata Banerjee wins crushing victory over communists in West Bengal, while Jayalalithaa triumphs in Tamil Nadu. Mamata Banerjee spent Friday morning listening to classical music while finishing an oil painting. By the evening she was in charge of state with a population of 90 million, after winning a crushing victory over the Indian Communist party and putting an end to three decades of leftwing rule in West Bengal.

Her victory came as results from a string of state elections across India consolidated female politicians in some of the country's most prominent positions.

In the vast southern state of Tamil Nadu, Jayalalithaa, a former movie star who goes by one name, swept aside the incumbent government in an acrimonious fight fuelled by corruption allegations.

Ramachandra Guha, a political historian and analyst, said the results were unprecedented. "You don't want to go too far as huge problems of gender inequality, foeticide, oppression and discrimination against women remain in India but it is still exceptional to have so many very powerful women at one time," Guha said.

Sonia Gandhi, the president of the Congress party, remains the most influential single politician in the country. Other prominent female politicians include Sheila Dikshit, the chief minister of the capital, Delhi, and Mayawati, who runs the vast state of Uttar Pradesh. The president of India, a largely ceremonial position, is also a woman, Pratibha Patil.

The victory of Banerjee's All India Trinamool Congress had been widely predicted. The Communist party in West Bengal has seen its once powerful support base weakened by corruption, poor administration, a series of land protests and a failure to bring any serious economic growth.

Vinod Mehta, editor of Outlook news magazine, said the party had lost power because of "more than three decades of misgovernment and dogma".

Banerjee said hers was a victory "of hapless people who have faced exploitation, violence and discrimination". But some analysts have reservations about her ability to deal with the problems facing West Bengal, where poverty in many areas is equal to that in sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusion

The idea of reserving seats for women in Parliament and State Legislatures is an extension of the reform carried out in the composition of the local self governing institutions under the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts. Women were given one-third of the seats in these bodies which too were being dominated by men till then. Though it is premature at this stage to pronounce a categorical verdict of the success or otherwise of this experiment, it cannot be denied that the active involvement of women in the working of these bodies has had a salutary effect on public life. It has brought more women into nation building activity at the local level at least. The present national level indicators are also not encouraging for the future of political empowerment of women unless the pending constitution amendment bill providing one-third reservation of seats in Parliament and state legislatures is passed.

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