

The Imbalanced Political Participation of Women in India

Manorama Gupta

Abstract—The marginalization of women in electoral politics is deeply embedded in the party system and the imbalanced gender power relations in the main political dispensations in India. They continue to be discriminated against not only in terms of seat allotments to contest elections but also within the rank and file of major political parties. In this paper we will discuss Indian women's participation in politics reason behind its imbalanced scenario.

Keywords—Political, Participation, Women, India.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE Political participation is a term which possess very wide meaning. It is related to participation in decision making process, political activism, political consciousness, etc.. Political activism and voting are the strongest areas of women's political participation. To combat gender inequality in politics, the Indian Government has instituted reservations for seats in local governments.

The 15th Lok Sabha in India (2009) comprised 61 women members, only 11.2% of the total Lok Sabha membership. While it has increased from 9.02% in 1999, it is almost half of the world average of 22.2%. The Rajya Sabha does not fare much better, with 27 women members comprising 11.5% of the total membership in 2013.2 Again, while this is an improvement from the 1999 figure of 7.76%, it is far below the world average of 19.6%. It comes as no surprise then that India is ranked 111th in the World Rankings of Women in national parliaments, compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union.³ India's rank is one of the lowest in the region, and falls below her neighbours. Nepal ranked at 36, Afghanistan at 41, China at 61, Pakistan at 72 and Bangladesh at 74.

Women's Reservation Bill

The Women's Reservation Bill, or The Constitution 108th Amendment Bill, proposes 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies for 15 years. The Bill was introduced in the Parliament in 1996, and subsequently in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008 and 2010. It was finally passed by the Rajya Sabha in 2010, but is still pending in the Lok Sabha. With the dissolution of the current Lok Sabha, the Bill will lapse and will have to be re-introduced.

The introduction of the Bill will increase women's participation and lead to women's empowerment. However,

the Bill has still not been passed. Opposition to the Bill includes fears of marginalisation of men by elitist women and of socially and economically backward classes. Suggestions have also been made to instead mandatorily increase the number of women contestants.

Imbalanced participation of women

The political participation of women can be analyzed using a triangle model deconstructing their electoral interactions at three stages within the framework of general elections. At the top are women in the Lok Sabha. Their representation has increased from 22 seats in the 1952 election to 61 seats this year, a phenomenal increase of 36 percentage points. However, gender disparity remains skewed as nine out of ten parliamentarians in the Lok Sabha are men.

In 1952, women constituted 4.4 percent of Lok Sabha members, and now account for around 11 percent, but it is still below the world average of 20 percent. Both national and regional parties are following the policy of exclusion of women in allotting seats. The reason for not giving tickets to women candidates at the national and state level is based on the perception that they lack the 'win-ability' factor.

Reason behind imbalanced participation:

The level and forms of women's participation in politics is largely shaped by cultural and societal barriers in the form of violence, discrimination and illiteracy.

Sexual violence

Martha Nussbaum highlighted a significant barrier to women's capability of participating in politics to be the threat of violence. Sexual violence in India is exacerbated by issues of education and marriage. Women are sexually abused. Child marriage, domestic violence and low literacy rates have lowered Indian women's economic opportunities and contributed to sexual violence in India. A 2011 study found, "24% of Indian men have committed sexual violence at some point in their lives, 20% have forced their partners to have sex with them...38% of men admitting they had physically abused their partners." Widespread sexual violence is attributed to the fact that violence within marriage is not against the law, and sexual violence goes largely unpunished. Martha C. Nussbaum states that "In the larger society, violence and the threat of violence affects many women's ability to participate actively in many forms of social and political relationship, to speak in public, to be recognized as dignified beings whose worth is equal to that of others." Self-confidence is likely to increase participation among Indian women, specifically in running for election.

Dr. Manorama Gupta is working as an Associate Professor of political Science with DAV PG College, Kanpur, India.

Discrimination

Although the Constitution of India removed gender inequalities among caste and gender, discrimination continues to be a widespread barrier to women's political participation. A 2012 study of 3,000 Indian women found the barriers in participation, specifically in running for political office, in the form of illiteracy, work burdens within the household, and discriminatory attitudes towards women as leaders. Discriminatory attitudes manifest in the limitations presented to Indian women including low access to information and resources. Women rely on receiving information from family or village members, typically men. Women also lack leadership experience due to the fact they are burdened with household duties. The burden of household duties is a significant reason why many Indian women do not participate. Unlike men, there are fewer opportunities for women to get involved in organizations to gain leadership skills. There is little public space for them as men have dominated the political arena for many years in India.

Discrimination is further perpetuated by class. Dalit women, of the lowest caste in India, are continually discriminated against in running for public office. The Government of India requires reservation of seats for Dalits and Scheduled Castes, but women suffer from abuse and discrimination when serving as elected officials. Dalit women experience harassment by being denied information, ignored or silenced in meetings, and in some cases petitioned to be removed from their elected position.

Illiteracy

India has one of the largest illiterate populations. In January 2014, the United Nations reported 287 million adults in India are illiterate. 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. Problems with exploitation, such as women being left off of voters lists, have been reported as illiteracy limits the ability of women to ensure their political rights are exercised. Martha C. Nussbaum concerning political participation stated, "Because literacy is connected in general with the ability to move outside the home and to stand on one's own outside of it, it is also connected to the ability of women to meet and collaborate with other women." Studies conducted by Niraja Jayal and Nirmala Buch found women are "persistently mocked and devalued in the panchayats if they are illiterate." Nussbaum also found literacy can play a key role in the dignification and independence of women in politics by giving them access to communications, such as memos and newspapers, they can become better informed on political issues.

Overcoming barriers to participation

To overcome issues of discrimination and violence, women's organizations have focused on the empowerment of Indian women. Empowerment is tied to the support of family and improved status within the household, which is undermined by the threat of domestic and sexual violence. Socio-economic conditions, such as poverty and illiteracy,

prevent the entrance of women into running for public office, and even voting. Inability to understand the rules of Panchayat Raj undermines the self-confidence to participation in public office. Empowerment of Indian women can also occur through "bridging gaps in education, renegotiating gender roles, the gender division of labour and addressing biased attitudes." Women can also be empowered to participate by family, and when familial support is present they are more likely to run for office.

Though women continue to be under-represented in legislative bodies and relegated to the fringes in party cadres, their participation as voters has taken a quantum leap. The participatory upsurge witnessed among women as voters in the 1990s reached its peak in the general election held in 2014. Their participation in the electoral process as voters has steadily increased from 46.6 percent in 1962 to around 65.7 percent this year. The difference in voter turnout among men and women, as wide as 16.7 percent in 1962, has narrowed to 1.5 percent in 2014.

The reservation of 33 percent seats for women in panchayati raj institutions in the 1990s gave women a sense of sharing power with men equally. It acted as a catalyst and provided much-needed momentum, which resulted in the upsurge of women voters. The highest voter turnout among women in this election could be due to many reasons but the intense voter awareness campaigns of the Election Commission and door-to-door campaigns by political parties are the most plausible determinants to explain this phenomenon.

The analysis of the pattern of women's voting reveals that they have never voted en bloc like Dalits and Muslims in any election. It also shows that there has never been a concerted effort by political parties in mobilizing them. A quick scan of the manifestos of major political parties in the last few general elections shows that gender issues figured prominently. But manifesto promises on women's issues are clichéd and are conveniently forgotten afterwards. The failure in passing the women's reservation bill in parliament is a clear testimony of the lack of seriousness and will of political parties in addressing women's issues.

II. CONCLUSION

The only silver lining in the dark clouds hovering over women's participation in formal politics has been the marked increase in voting turnout among women. The women's movement and gender politics in India is currently divided over the question of affirmative action for women in parliament and state legislatures. It centres around two main issues: first, the issue of overlapping quotas for women in the general category and for those in backward caste communities and second, the issue of elitism. Thus, affirmative action for women in legislative bodies is the need of the hour as it would go a long way in removing obstacles that inhibit their participation. It would bridge the wide men-women gap in the electoral set-up and pave the way for gender-inclusive electoral politics.

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