

Women and Political Participation in India: Barriers and Opportunities

Dr.Renu Bala

Associate Professor (Economics), S.S.V. College, Hapur

Abstract: This paper delves into the causes of women's low political participation rate. Despite having exclusive rights to political participation provided legally, women were restricted from accessing the same. The government has initiated various programmes, including the right to education of women, the creation of 'Mahila Mandals', setting up special cells in educational institutions and enhancing legal rights. The paper also highlights the issues of lower levels of consumption patterns of women compared to the male members of the family and pinpoints the issues of poor rates of funding provided to women's organisations, women not being part of decision-making processes, gender discrimination and stereotyping as the significant factors affecting women's dismal rates of political participation in India.

Keywords: Female literacy, gender discrimination and stereotyping, Mahila Mandals, special cells, women's political participation.

Women, in general, remain excluded from participating in the political front. Their low participation in politics is again because of the male-oriented authority structure, anti-feminine public attitude, lack of social and legal protection of women or women's organizations, limited or truncated legal rights to divorce and rights and control over maternity, fertility and child custody. Therefore, it is the time of the hour to encourage them to come out of their shells and shed inhibitions to participate more in politics. The political parties should offer them positions of power, and they should invariably be co-opted in important decision-making. Hence, there is a need for more legislative reforms in favour of women and their position in the family and society.

There are various rights exclusively for women by the constitution and rights conferred on them legally;

- a) Political equality is granted to women under the Indian constitution, guaranteed through the instrument of adult franchise and by Article 15, which prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex. But the constitution as a sanction is enjoyed only to a limited extent by women in reality.
- b) More and more women are now actively participating in the political process. However, only a few women hold elected positions, and fewer still are so placed as to be able to influence political thinking.
- c) There is a greater awareness among women of power that the right of the franchise has been given to them. Still, the extent of awareness varies significantly between different groups and different religions.
- d) The level of literacy and urbanisation had an impact on awareness. Still, the political parties have generally been indifferent towards women and treat them more as appendices to men.

For the upgradation of women's status, they now join in a cooperative effort and organise themselves. The primary key is realising that their institutions, like Mahila-Mandals and other women's service organisations, should be encouraged to provide a common platform for joint action. Now the time has come that women must prove they are valuable and indispensable members of society. Mahila Mandals, or in the literal term, women's clubs, are traditional women's organisations set up locally. These are informal communities of women. Mahila Mandals may be found in both rural and urban areas in India. In rural India, since time immemorial, women have been congregating together for social and cultural community activities like festivals, births, deaths, weddings, local functions, visits of dignitaries and most of all, getting together in times of crisis, like any natural calamity such as floods, droughts or epidemics. These Mahila Mandals function

within the boundaries of the social norms prevalent in the patriarchal order. Hence, organisations such as these are readily accepted by all sections of society. Therefore, it becomes easier for women in the Mahila Mandals to raise awareness about women's political participation in the locality, encourage women members to participate in active politics and further instil the community the benefits of the involvement of women in politics.

Although the Government of India has provided free education for women up to the secondary level and also set up a separate department of women's studies and women's cells for women's welfare, investment in women's education and female literacy (i.e. girl's education) can become a forceful instrument for economic growth and women's empowerment. But more is needed for women's empowerment and political socialization of women. There is a dire need to change women's and society's outlook regarding women's roles in their families and society. The community continues perpetuating the traditional model of women's role in bearing children, raising them and caring for household chores. The potential women possess to make a mark in the professional arena is rarely highlighted in the traditional discourses on women's roles. However, due to the prevailing mindsets, there emerges a strong need for women to be provided more information in other areas like political rights, human rights of women and legal rights etc., to make them well informed about their status.

It has been said that "if you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate the entire family." So, women's education in India has deep rooted significance.

Strengthening women's cells in educational institutions in the country is the utmost requirement of the hour. As the University Grants Commission (UGC) has set up special cells for women in some universities, they must undertake some developmental, capacity building and training programmes for women. At present, it has become the requirement of every educational institute/college to establish special cells on women's studies and research too. It will be fine if these women's cells work at the grass root level, i.e. women's cells go to the women of rural areas by adopting a particular area and start their programmes there. This area demarcation is a must; otherwise, developmental programmes taken up generally will be understood as merely throwing arrows in the

darkness.

The Government of India took notice of women's low political participation rates and the Committee on the Status of Women's Report, 1974. Taking lessons from experience in Karnataka, where women were provided reservation in tier three Panchayat Raj system, a traditional institution of local self-government, in 1983, adopted affirmative action of providing reservation for women in local self-government institutions in the year 1993. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was implemented, which ensured that not less than 33 per cent of women's seats would be reserved in the Panchayat Raj institutions in rural areas. Similarly, the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act brought about similar provisions in the urban areas ensuring 33 per cent reservation of women in Nagar Palikas and Municipalities in towns and cities. The constitutional amendment enabled vast numbers of women to actively participate in shaping the policies and programmes laid down by the central and state governments even though at the upper levels, such as the level of the State and Central government, this provision is lacking and therefore, the participation of women in politics in the State and Central government continues to be dismal.

Reservations enjoy great popularity in overcoming deep-rooted inequality. However, evidence on the impact of reservations and the mechanisms through which they may work needs to be clarified. Village-level and household-level data from India for the previous Panchayat periods explore and document the dynamic effects of female reservation on the subjective and objective quality of public service delivery, political participation, and willingness to contribute to public goods. While political participation by women in the state and national legislative bodies remains low, and women still do not actively participate in political life, almost a third of the seats in local bodies and the chairpersonship of these bodies is now with women. Which women are, however, willing to participate actively in local bodies? Research projects conducted in rural areas in the North Indian state of Haryana. In this geographically concentrated region, context-specific influences on participation could be controlled. It has been argued that the standard individual-focused models of political participation need to be revised, for there are solid contextual influences on participation. The study revealed that the lack of awareness of the extent of the reservations for women does not mean that women are unaware of the influence of politics in their lives. Most of the women felt that

political participation would be suitable for them, that participation would solve the problems faced by women, and that it would also raise their social status. More importantly, most women did not see entering political life as disrupting any other facet of their life, such as looking after family and children, in a significant way.

Furthermore, the voice for equality, self-sufficiency, and education was almost unanimous among the women interviewed. This unanimity persisted even though in Haryana, most women still practice purdah and live in an area characterized by village exogamy. Moreover, the fact that women are quite expressive about equality raises doubts about theories that women are not aware of their rights and buy into the dominant male social and political discourse.

Bina Agarwal draws upon Bourdieu's notion of doxa to suggest that women in India do not resist the dominant patriarchal ideology. The ramification of such a mentality can be seen in various implications, such as the rural Indian women's acceptance of their subordinate position because they do not question some of the discrimination experienced in some facets of their life, especially in their relationships with men. Most women in India agree that they lack social mobility.

The above discussion suggests that there is a need to alter the social and cultural practices guided by patriarchal ideology apart from making interventions at the level of modern institutions along with legal measures for women to get motivated to participate in the public sphere and step into the political sphere.

In the following sections, the factors that led to the rise in women's political awareness and participation have been analysed.

Factors Affecting Women's Political Participation and Awareness:-

The root cause of fewer women's political participation is either total or partial illiteracy or less education as compared to their male counterparts' lack proper education, and the discriminatory attitude of society toward woman's education has affected their educational, social, vocational, cultural, economic and political status in general. If the rate of women's political participation in

politics needs to be raised, in that case, a concerted effort must be made in terms of the socio-economic empowerment of women. Therefore, women's organisations have a huge role to play in bringing social change by creating awareness and forming pressure groups to enact more legal entitlements. One of the critical areas that require legal intervention is the inheritance rights of women. The legal entitlements need to be translated into practical awareness and encouragement measures by which women would not deter from claiming their rights over their parental properties.

Women's lower levels of participation in political life can also be accounted for by their role in the household. It is widely known that women who can exercise autonomy in and from the household are more likely to participate actively in political life. Any political activity takes place in the public sphere. Political participation is fundamentally a public act – for men and women. All around the world, it is common to find that men who occupy and control public spaces and legislative spaces remain in men's domains, and women are kept out of public spaces. Once women become active politically, they tend to make space within the public sphere and can occupy those spaces. The first initiative to be taken for their entry into public spaces is to break free from their private spaces or homes. The freedom to move out of their homes is usually lower for women than men, which needs to be addressed for women to participate in public spheres.

Female illiteracy is prevalent mainly due to poverty, the orthodox nature of parents, social customs and taboos, co-education and distant schools, lack of motivation and apathy on the part of the girls because of time spent sharing domestic chores.

The family and the community are two levels of governance, based on the historical, artificial, and judicial. Specific communities and families/households have been excluded from the range and conceptualization of governance. The outcome of this exclusion is that inequalities within families have been systematically ignored until the condoning of double standards of public and private behaviour. It was possible only in 1993 that a world conference on Human Rights was organized, and it broke down the distinction between public and private behaviour and laid the assertions such as threats and acts of torture, violence, enslavement and exploitation of women and girls within the private sphere are violations of human rights and democratic principles. Similarly, in the economic

arena, inaccurate assumptions have been made about economic production. For example, similar inaccuracies have been made about consumption measured by family, not gender or age, without considering that consumption patterns and needs are very different for men and women.

The self-governance of civil society tends to be heavily discriminatory against women as a social group and against other forms of difference, ethnicity, poverty, culture and religion. The leading positions are taken and preserved for men unless there are countervailing measures to create the opportunity for women to assume their posts or for women themselves to manipulate a small revolution.

Specific barriers, such as male solidarity and competition within political parties, repel women. The common practice of patronage, as the basis of nomination for candidature or office, can and does lead to sexual harassment. This factor of sexual harassment is the major hurdle in less participation in the politics. The diverse opinions and demands of women, the demands for gender equity and inequality itself, do matter in this regard.

Gender discrimination and stereotyping have led to occupational segregation within almost all workplaces, the advantages or disadvantages of which accompany any worker their life. There is little democratic governance, and the human rights of free association and speech are often not sustained. The responsibility of all household chores and looking after the children and sick have traditionally been female responsibilities. In this way, female workers and in general, push themselves into desperate conformity. This becomes the major factor in less participation in the political sphere.

Women and their interests, needs and perspectives have not been regarded as a social group to be represented. Decisions and actions of governance are taken in the name of women but without consultation with them: there is presumed consent and presumed commonality of interest. The presumption is not necessarily borne out in reality.

A vital hindrance is that ill-funded women's organizations need to be a better substitute for recognized participation in the governance processes with the ability and legitimacy to influence and shape social and economic development.

It may be concluded that changes in the value system are required to bring about a positive change in the status of women in our country. Women should be made aware of their political and legal rights and ensure literacy and employment opportunities. Attitudes of both men and women towards gender-based roles in society need to change. Therefore, a series of deliberate and planned efforts are essential to enhance the status of women and subsequently encourage women to enter the political domain and participate in it.

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