
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA

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Abstract: Women's participation in mainstream political activity has important implications for the broader arena of governance in a country. Governance in an relates to a set of rules institutions, and values government of state and society. women constitute half the population in a political system which supports equality and where both women and men are legally eligible for political office, women's participation should be equal to that of men. Liberal democracy is founded on reason, law, and freedom of choice but the position of different social groups in the social and political space where power is located is not always equal in practice. This is particularly so in the case of women. The nature of society or state has a decisive impact on the extent and effectiveness of women's political presence and participation. The nature of society or state has a decisive impact on the extent and effectiveness of women's political presence and participation. The state and its organizational entities reflect the same social forces as other social organizations. It is thus necessary to examine the gender balance in women's participation in the political process, decision making and policy formulation. The limited nature of female participation and representation in national decision making institutions has important consequences for women and for the legitimacy of their institutions. Political Participation and Representation of women in India.

Introduction : Women in India raised the issue of representation in politics first in 1917. At that time it was basically a demand for universal adult franchise and political participation. By 1930 women had gained the Right to vote, which initially benefited women from elite families. Women's involvement in struggles for political and civil rights in India were however sought to be linked to nationalist movements in alliance with males against the common foreign enemy. In any case women's involvement in nationalist struggles changed their lives in that even though they were denied equal opportunities to shape the new state, they gained constitutional and legal rights. But even after the right to vote became a reality for all women, their representation in the parliament, political parties and other decision making bodies remained low even after independence, and after the Indian Constitution came into force in 1950. (Susheela Kaushik:1993:1996, Veena Mazumdar:1993).

A few women no doubt attained positions as members of parliament and state legislatures and as leaders of opposition, etc. mostly through family dynasties or through male political patronage. However, the percentage of women in legislatures and decision making positions always remained low Women do not share the power of decision-making and are not involved in policy making in Indian democracy in Proportion to their numerical strength. Thus there is a gap between the formal idea of women's participation and their meaningful use of power.(Susheela Kaushik:1993). The question for greater political representation of women is, therefore, still relevant Women in India have lesser opportunities of public influence or for entering politics. Women also lack opportunities to move with in the hierarchies without patronage of male leaders or mentors. The women's wings of political parties may have given visibility to women in the form of a platform for participation rather than integrating the minto central power structures.

The case for women's wider participation and

representation: Women in India constitute nearly half the population of the country but they are poorly represented in the various governance and decision making bodies. The position depicted through the 14 general elections so far reflects a low representation of women in Parliament, State legislatures, in political parties and other decision-making bodies. Less than 8% of Parliamentary seats, less than 6% Cabinet positions, less than 4%of seats in High Courts and the Supreme Court, have been occupied by women. Less than 3% of the administrators and managers are women. The average percentage of women's representation in the Parliament, Assemblies and Council of Ministers taken together has been around 10%. (UNIFEM:2000).

The Indian Constitution guarantees to all women the fundamental right to equality (Article 14) and equal voting rights and political participation to both men and women. As reflected in the Preamble, the Indian Constitution is firmly grounded in the principles of liberty, fraternity, equality and justice and contains a number of provisions for the empowerment of women. Women's right to equality and non-discrimination are defined as justice able fundamental rights (Article 15) and there is enough room for affirmative action programmes for women. Equality of opportunity in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State is a fundamental right (Article16). The Directive Principles of State Policy stress on the right to an adequate means of livelihood for both men and women equally (Article 39a), equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39d), provision for just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief (Article 39e).

Political Mobilization and Participation:

Historically many women have been active in the informal political sphere in terms of political mobilization and they have participated in large numbers in political demonstrations and mass agitations as well as in the activities of nationalist and political bodies and organizations. The political mobilization and

participation of women has been impressive in the Indian National Movement, in revolutionary Left movements, anti-price rise stirrings, on legislation on rape, against the practice of widow immolation, in the anti-liquor movements and movements against deforestation etc. During the National Movement against colonialism women were mobilized actively particularly under Gandhi's leadership and women's organizations within the political parties participated actively in the cause against colonialism for instance in the Civil Disobedience Movements and Salt Satyagraha etc. But once freedom was won, the women's wings were more or less marginalized and assigned areas that primarily dealt with women and children or other 'welfare' activities and women's organizations ended up playing a secondary and supportive role to the male leadership in power.

The leaders of such organizations were seldom women with independent political careers unless they were from political families with the backing of male political activists. It is worth noting that the political mobilization of women and their participation in elections has steadily increased since the first General Elections of 1952. Between 1952–1980 for instance, women's participation increased by 12% against the turnout of men which increased by only 6%. In the general elections of 2004, the all India percentage of women voter turnout was 48%. As regards women voters' turnout, from 37.1 per cent in the first general elections in 1952 it increased gradually over the years to 55.6 by 1999. Notably, the gap between female and male voters was 15.9 per cent in 1952, but it decreased slowly over successive elections and came down to 8.4 per cent in 1996. It has remained at 8.3 per cent in 2004 general elections. (Deshpande: 2004). This percentage increase in the turnout of women in elections has however not translated into a larger number of women being represented in the legislative bodies. Competitive election and democracy has not necessarily led to better political representation of women in Indian politics. The candidates fielded by the various political parties are still predominantly male and women account for only five to ten percent of all candidates across parties and regions. As reflected in the percentage of representation of women in the Lok Sabha varies from 4.4 in 1952 to 8.1 in 1984, declining to 5.2 in 1989, rising to 7.9 in 1998 and 9.02 in 1999 and again declining to 8.1 in 2004. In Rajya Sabha, proportion of female members started with 7.3 per cent in 1952 and rose to 15.5 per cent in 1991, but again declined to 6 per cent in 1998 and rose to 10.3 per cent in 2005, again slightly declining to 9.9 per cent in 2006.

On the whole the representation of women in Parliament (Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha) and the State Assemblies remains low. Thus despite the increase in electoral participation of women, their representation in the formal political structures has not changed much.

Though voting is an important indicator of political

participation and mobilization, it is not necessarily indicative of representation. Voting is a tool of political equality and it mobilizes women but voting by itself does not result in the desired end of equality. Almost all parties vie with each other in appealing to women's votes at the time of elections but very few women get to contest in the elections. Almost all parties hesitate to field women candidates. Hence the number of women candidates fielded by various political parties has always been very low as compared to their numbers in the population. Though a large number of women participate in voting, their low numbers in decision making bodies including those of political parties in India is not able. Among women who manage to rise in the political echelons, in spite of their ability in administration and the art of political articulation, very few women reach the level of cabinet ministers. Mostly they remain deputy ministers or ministers of state. When women reach the few ministerial positions, they are generally assigned portfolios in the social service sectors of Health, Education, Social Welfare, Women and Child Development etc.

Representation: By the 1980s, issues raised by the women's movements in India led to political parties realizing the importance of female voters and women's wings became active. Mainstream political parties became conscious of women as a constituency and this was reflected in their election manifestoes and their considering women as candidates with potential votes. By the ninth Lok Sabha elections in 1989, one could find a conscious focus on women's issues in the manifestoes of political parties. However, this did not translate into more seats for women in the political bodies and most parties resorted to to kenism and symbolism when it came to representation of women. Women issues were not taken up by parties in a serious manner nor translated into programmes, policies and legislation nor were they mandated specifically to address issues of women. Almost all political parties set up a women's cell or wing but they worked as

ancillary bodies. Very few women were able to capture seats of power. The number of women in the legislatures remained very small. Very few women reached the position of party president or leader of legislative party.

Power rather than Representation: The real reason for the low political representation of women in the formal Political structures and decision making levels, seems to lie in the compulsions of competitive elections and the quest for power by the political parties in a multiparty democracy. Increasingly the compulsions of the political parties due to narrow majorities, precarious coalitions and hung parliaments have made the Question of power rather than that of representation the determining factor. Women's issues and women's participation and representation are encouraged only within the parameters of power and are constrained by the basic objectives and interest of the parties either to capture power or survival, if in power. While women are

mobilized to vote by all the parties, at the stage of distributing tickets for standing for elections, the number of women drops dramatically. At this stage, political parties are driven more by power considerations with an eye on the 'win ability' of the candidates from the angle of the prospect of government formation. Women lose out at this stage as the imperative of 'win ability' seems to compel political parties to deny tickets to women unless they are sure to win.

Conclusion: It is important to stress that like the equal right to vote, participation and representation in legislative bodies may not in itself be enough for women's political empowerment or to remedy the problems of discrimination faced by women in Indian society. Equality with equity is a goal which may not easily be achieved only by high representation of women in legislatures and other public bodies but has to be

buttressed by other supportive measures. Even so, the demand for reservation of seats for women in political bodies to rectify the imbalance has gained strength in India in the light of persisting gender gaps in the various spheres of development. In the absence of any serious political self correction so far, the demand for reservation of seats in legislatures and party structures has been stressed in India aiming at such an equitable representation. While the steady increase in the electoral participation and mobilization of women in India has increased the visibility of women in the legislative politics this has not happened in the exercise of executive and judicial power due to their lack of presence in the decision making structures. From this perspective, the important question is what are the benefits of democracy for women. Electoral participation and quotas through affirmative action alone are not enough to result in gender equity.

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