
EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN THE POLITICAL SCENARIO

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Abstract: The very concept of women empowerment shows that the society has given a raw deal to women who comprise nearly half of the population and the women themselves have to come forward to fight for their rightful place in all walks of life. The women who number 498.7 million according to the 2001 census of India represent 48.2% of the country's population of 1,027,01 million.

Introduction: The sentiment in favor of political empowerment is not new. It was accepted very gracefully in India and Indian women did not have to fight for this right unlike in western countries. In response to the Indian agitation, the British Government set up a committee headed by Montague and Chelmsford in 1919 to work out a plan to include Indians in the Government. Many groups presented their case for representation and Sarojini Naidu and Margaret Cousins led a delegation of women to demand women representation in legislatures, The British Government thought that this demand was quite too early in a society which continued to enforce purdah and prohibition against female education. However, the British decided to leave the matter to the individual provincial legislature either to grant or refuse political rights to women. Their assumption was that Indians were so backward that they would never allow women to enjoy equal political rights with men. However, each Indian provincial legislature voted in a short span of time for women to be represented on par with men. In 1931 Karachi Session the Indian National Congress took the historic decision of giving political equality to women regardless of their status and qualification.

Gandhiji played a crucial role in creating a congenial atmosphere for women's participation in the freedom movement. He insisted that the struggle for women's equality was an integral part of the movement for Swaraj.¹ He worked consciously to feminize the freedom movement. His principles of truth and non-violence were such that women readily accepted to follow them. All the modes of struggle of Gandhiji were from feminine realm. Spinning has become a woman's activity. By salt satyagraha he brought the movement into every kitchen. Thus he could organize huge women folk into action. According to Nehru. "Our women came to the forefront and took charge of the struggle" Annie Besant in, 1919 and Sarojini Naidu in 1925 became Congress party presidents. Women's participation in politics enhanced dramatically in the 1930s and 1940.

However the decades following independence witnessed decline in women's participation in politics. During 1930s and 1940s there were more women leaders at all levels in the Congress party alone than are found today in all the parties together we have rising percentage of women in other fields but the participation of women in politics has remained extremely low.

The decline it is argued is partly due to Gandhian legacy. Gandhiji wanted the participation of women in the

freedom movement but he did not encourage them to compete for power. He wanted women to cleanse politics by bringing in the spirit of selfless sacrifice rather than compete with man in powergrabbing. He decided their role on their behalf and said "And you sisters what would you do bi' going to parliament. Do you aspire after Collectorships, Commissionerships or even the Viceroyalty? I know that you would not care for the Viceroy has got an order executions and hanging's a thing that you would heartily detest".¹ Thus many women after independence worked organizations like Seva Dal and many withdrew from active involvement in the politics. Power hungry politicians systematically sidelined those who remained in the party.²

The process of decline further continued in Nehru era. The constructive programmers of congress Party evolved under Gandhi were transformed into the community Development programme run by the bureaucrats. This way the Nehru government served the mass contact of congress workers with their respective communities. The decline of women participation was part of this process of destruction of the congress party of local leader with grassroots support and the party became a party of power brokers.

As Indira Gandhi came to power the country witnessed further fall in women's political participation. With decision making bodies getting more and more remote from common mans life, due to over centralization of power few women who were active were further marginalized. Getting a party ticket was no longer easy for dedicated, self-respecting women political workers. Mrs. Indira Gandhi seemed averse to share the limelight with other women politicians especially those who had developed in independent political existence. Many women stalwarts like Tarakeshwari Sinha, Nandini Satpathi and women of Mrs. Gandhi's own family were deliberately eclipsed. Thus first women prime minister played her own rule in pushing women out of political arena.³

When Rajiv Gandhi came to power, he tried to project himself as a pro women leader of the party. During his tenure as the Prime Minister there were 44 women MPs, the highest ever in Loksabha. Yet, they constituted no more than 7.9 of the total. It was he who was instrumental in recommending 1/3 reservation of women in Panchyat Raj institutions.

The congress party was no doubt instrumental in the decline of women's participation in politics. However the other parties, left or right, should be equally blamed.

The congress appears to be emulated by them. The track record of the non-congress parties is no better as far as women's participation in politics is concerned. The overall percentage of participation given to women remains very low. The Bharatiya Janata Party seems to be overtaking other parties in fielding large number of women candidates. However, the recent country wide opinion survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies for India Today provides that 75% of men and 79% of women favor active participation of women in politics and 75% of men and women favor reservation for women in legislatures.⁴This indicates that electorates are far ahead of political parties.

Constitution:The constitution makers were influenced by the western liberal ideas which have been given expression in the constitution drafted for India. There are many references to the status of woman in Indian Constitution. The constitutional status of woman in India needs to be understood, in terms of the rights and privileges given to everyone irrespective of sex. The text of the preamble of the constitution reads thus

WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST, SECULAR and DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to Secure to all its citizen:

JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, faith, belief and worship.

EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all;

FRATERNITY, assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and in-of the nation;

The Right to Equality is guaranteed in Part III of the Indian Constitution. Article 14 says that the state shall not deny to any person equality before law or equal protection of laws within its territory. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Article 16 says about the equality of opportunity in matters of employment and states that the state can make no discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth or residence. Articles 23 and 24th deal with the right against exploitation. Article 23 prohibits traffic in human beings.

Article 326 provides universal adult, suffrage to all the citizens of India.

Part IV of the Constitution containing 16 Articles from 36 to 51 cover a wide range of provisions relating to the status of women. Article 39 (d) provides equal pay for equal work for both men and women. Article 42 guarantees just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.

Article 51 A (e) states that it shall be the duty of every citizen of India to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. To give expression to these numerous provisions of the Constitution, the Governments have enacted several legislations and have acknowledged the equal status of women.

Empowerment:Women empowerment in national and

state politics has just become a non starter. It has taken 50 years and 14 Lok Sabhas for the percentage of women members in the house to move up partially from a mere 4.4% Jan 1952 to 8.8% now. Our dismal record is comparative to Brazil's 8.6%, Indonesia's 8.0%, Russia's 7.6%, Japan's 7.3%, Sri Lanka's 4.4% and Bangladesh's 2.0%, we are far behind countries like Sweden (45.3%), Cuba (36%), Germany (32.2%), China (21.8%), Pakistan (21.6%), UK (17.9%) and France (12.2%).

Of course we made a bold beginning in respect of the political empowerment at the grassroots level during the Rajiv Gandhi regime. During his times the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill for Reservation for women in Panchayath was introduced. Though it failed in the Rajya Sabha. It was reintroduced during P.V. Narasimha Rao's regime in December 1992 Parliament presented the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment providing for 30% reservation for women in the Panchayat Raj bodies.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has made an effort, to give some Special Powers to women in all the tiers of Panchayat Raj system. The rationale behind this amendment was that the social and economic status of women could not be improved much without political powers. Women who have been working in the fields as casual laborers, washing vessels at home, fetching water, cooking food for family now legally permitted to share on par with men the power of decision making in village matters. Thus there has been revolution in India where 80,000 women secured position of power at the local level. A scheduled caste woman Baby Mayor became the Mayor of Agra in 1995 and Zeenat.

Naaz became Chief of Municipal Board of Deoband in spite of a writ issued against participation of women in politics. Large scale entry of women in local bodies in rural and urban India has changed the face of the elected bodies. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) constituency had only five women corporators before 1992, and in 2002, 78 women were elected to the 227 member house.⁷ The parliamentary committee on empowerment of women in its report in June, 2000 states that on the basis of women's representatives in elected bodies, India occupies 71st place in the world.

Since 1996 the women of India have been waiting for the clearance of the Women's Reservation Bill that would give them one third reservation in parliament and state legislatures. India may reach sixth or seventh position if 33% of seats are reserved for women in parliament and state legislature the bill was introduced several times but because of the lack of sheer political will, it got stuck up. On some plea or the other, the move is obstructed repeatedly. The ball started rolling from the days of the Gujarat regime, got stuck up during Deve Gowda rule and started moving during A.B. Vajpayee administration. There have been ugly scenes in the Lok Sabha when agitated members tore up the bill or even snatched it from the minister introducing the bill. Almost all parties including those who opposed it in its

present form agree that women should be given greater representation in parliament and state legislatures.

Ultimately what form the Bill will take in when it comes to the Lok Sabha remains to be seen.

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