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TITLE

GENDER AND POLITICS: PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE INDIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

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Abstract:

India is one of the largest democracies of the world with a Constitution that incorporates the best features of various world Constitutions. The Indian Republic sets out by incorporating on the Preamble some of the best values like liberty, justice and equality, making Indian women feel secure with promises of survival, equal treatment and gender justice.¹ The making of the Indian Constitution fetched Indian women with legal equality. However, it does not ensure that women can claim as equal citizens as men even today as the progressive vision of the constitution has proved inadequate in addressing the complexities of gender discrimination be it how women are treated in the public or private sphere, political, social or economic sphere. So, this paper attempts to investigate how much did political participation of women in Indian political system have been successful in ensuring equality and development of women in India.

Key words: women, political participation, equality and India.

Introduction:

In India, there have been several women's movements by now, but women's movements are often used to refer women's participation in politics in general and not just to specific

¹ Preamble, Constitution of India.

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interventions in politics which challenge various forms of patriarchy and gender in justice. There is a popular belief that the Vedic period was the golden age of Indian womanhood. As it is argued that the position of women were held high in that period, until the coming in of the invaders. And it was only after coming of the invaders that restrictions were began to be imposed on women. All the social evils regarding women like purdah system, sati, female infanticide, were all argued to be the result of the fears for women's safety and security, which had their origins in a time of invasions. Similarly, the patriarchal feature of the Hindu society was explained entirely as a response to external threats. Women were excluded from participating in a variety of material transactions, from giving and receiving *dakshina*² on ritual occasions to giving and receiving tribute and taxes. Women also had only limited recognition only as wives and mothers. However, the Indian Constitution adopted some of the best features of the world Constitutions and emerged as one of the largest democracies of the world. The Indian Republic sets out by incorporating on the Preamble some of the best values like liberty, justice and equality, making Indian women feel secure with promises of survival, equal treatment and gender justice.³ The making of the Indian Constitution brought the women legal equality but whether it was also substantial equality for them was a question. Legal equality is important but laws alone cannot tackle gender equality. However, their dream of being equal citizens remain a far cry even today as the progressive vision of the constitution has proved inadequate in addressing the complexities of gender discrimination be it how women are treated in the public or private sphere, political, social or economic sphere.

Women in India:

Women began to work collectively against male supremacy at the beginning of the 20th century. And they claimed their oppression by linking patriarchal practices and imperialism. One of the landmarks in the rise of organised women's movements is the formation of the All India Women's Conference in 1927. Apart from feminist agenda,

² Means 'donation' in Sanskrit language.

³ Preamble, Constitution of India.

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women in India also had a nationalist agenda. Women joined the Indian National Congress Committees, took part in all forms of civil disobedience and also took prominent parts in the Communist Party and revolutionary groups. Women played an exceptional role in the Bombay Textile strike in 1928-29. Gandhi argued that 'feminine' qualities have the strength to combat imperial power. He associated feminity with spiritual and moral courage; characters those he chose for women to emulate were Sita and Draupadi rather than the Rani of Jhansi. The two central symbols that Gandhi used to generate a new life in the anti-imperialist struggle was khadi and salt and both were derived from women's life sustaining activities in the private realm, linking these in a revolutionary manner to the public.

India is a patriarchal state, which can be upheld more by the fact that in India not marital rape and only penetration is considered as rape. Any other form of sexual assault however grievous it can be is considered a lesser crime. In India, protective legislation has been used to restrict the employment of women. Gandhi and Shah have very well pointed out to the ambivalence on the issue among organizations involved with women workers (Gandhi, 1996). The relationship of women's organization with the state is often contradictory as on the one hand, the state is seen as the primary agent of oppression and on the other hand, the state is treated as the agent of change and protector of the powerless sections of the society. But qualities such as objectivity, rationality, universality, confidence and competitive are considered to be important for political participation. These qualities are believed to be present in abundance in men and not really in women. The qualities that women are actually believed to be associated with are irrationality, impulsiveness, submissiveness, indecisive, and indiscipline. This gender stereotype leads to the marginalization of women in the political arena as they are advised to keep away from politics and play only feminine and non-competitive roles (Khanna, 2009). Thus women develop a psychological mindset and tend to engage themselves in 'care-giver' roles and prefer to confine themselves to the private sphere i.e. home. This public and private dichotomy has resulted in women being marginalized in all spheres of activity be it social or economic or political.

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Women's participation in the Indian Political System:

In the political sphere, there is a wide gender gap between both voting and contesting in elections. The overall political atmosphere in the country discourages women from participating in politics. In India, the ruling elite has undermined the normal functioning of government and other public institutions. Criminalization of politics and the increasing involvement of violence in politics have further discouraged women in participating in the political sphere. These exposures of Indian women to greater criminalization, insecurity and corruption have resulted in their aversion for the political scene. Not only in voting but a wide gender gap is also noticed in contestation. Most political parties have always been reluctant to give tickets to women. In India, women came forward to demand for voting rights as early as in 1917, way before women in other parts of the world actually secured this right. To ensure equal opportunity to women and their participation, inclusion of women in the political process, especially in the decision-making process is a must. Otherwise, allocation of resources and decisions may not result in the interest of women. In the entire world scenario, it has been noticed that in many countries, women have not been successful in the political sphere. At the world level, only 10% of the parliamentary positions and 6% of the Cabinet Ministerial positions are occupied by women (Khanna, 2009). Only a few countries like Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway have crossed 30% representation of women in the parliament. However, for India, the numbers have taken a backward turn. The first Lok Sabha had 22 women, the second had 27, while the third had 34. A decline was witnessed in the fourth, (31 members) fifth (22 members), and sixth (19 members) Parliament. The next Lok Sabha showed an increase to 28 members, which was enhanced in 1984 to 44 (Khanna, 2009). The figures were fluctuating in the consequent Parliaments, 28 in the ninth, 39 in the tenth, 40 in the eleventh, 49 in the thirteenth and 45 in the fourteenth Lok Sabha (ibid). Women's vote has increased from 37% in 1952 to 68% in 1964, came down to 47% in 1991 but since then, it has been going up turning to 68% in 2019 Lok Sabha election. And the gap between men and women's voter turn out is also not very high. However, despite high level of activities, women are underrepresented in the Parliament.

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Only 4% women in the first Lok Sabha, 8% in 1998, 10% in 2001 and 11% in 2013 Lok Sabha. There has been an increase which is very slow. Similar was the case with women representation in the Rajya Sabha. This is because number of women candidates that political parties have nominated to run the legislature is not very high. Also political parties do not give large number of tickets to women. The issue is that political parties refrain from giving important roles in decision making within parties to women. Only way to reach the critical mass of 30% would be possible only by providing reservation to women.

India was the first country to have a woman Prime Minister for nearly twenty years. India also had a woman leader of opposition, woman speaker of the Lok Sabha and woman President and also Governors at state level. One-third reservation of women have changed the structure of politics to some extent but we still see that women have not been given adequate representation in decision making. Which are why there are still men are operating in panchayats in the village level in disguise of a woman's face. Representation of women is still less in other public services and administrative services sectors. In the property regime as well, women are treated as less than equal. Only a small section of women belonging to or supported by affluent and influential families have managed to enter the political mainstream (Kondreddy, 2000). On this line, Anuradha Bhoite argues about two types of equality; de jure and de facto (Bhoite, 1988). The three major political parties in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) have followed different approaches while dealing with the issue of women. BJP has followed certain agenda based mobilization of women over the time. It has mobilized women around Hindu Nationalist agenda. But its major mobilization (1989-94), it brought women into the world. Hindu women's activism comes mainly from three organizations; Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Visva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and BJP's Mahila Mocha. Most of the women who participated in the Ayodhya movement were from upper middle class families. It was entirely an upper and middle class domination. During the Ayodhya movement for the first time, Mahila Mocha recruited women from educated class. Most of the women were not earlier associated with women's movements and had not come from any women's organization.

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Their enthusiasm was emotional and not ideological. The question of women's rights did not figure in this at all. Although we see women's participation in some of BJP and RSS led movements but they were far from a feminism-based party. Women performed sex led roles as they were performing domestic roles in public domain. As for women, BJP's politics often cast in the language of formal equality rather than substantive equality. Many leaders projected active participation of women as Hindu women emancipation. In 1980's and 1990's rarely did the BJP Mahila Mocha raised any issue of gender justice. Women participation in BJP never questioned patriarchy and gender based role in families. The left oriented parties had mobilized women in a major way, particularly poor and deprived women. They have mobilized women on issues of poverty, gender equality, land distribution and so on. Left parties have always keep women at the center of their agendas. Congress party mobilized women on broader issues like democracy, secularism and federalism. Congress had set up a Ministry for Women and Child Welfare but at the same time, Congress may take things more liberal position in women's rights. The pre-election manifestoes of major parties- Congress I, Bhartiya Janata Party, CPI (M), Trinamool Congress had committed their support to reservation of 1/3 seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislatures by an amendment of the Constitution. However, the bill was met with rejections in 1996 under the Deve Gowda government and in 1988 under the Vajpayee government, after which it was introduced by the 85th Constitutional Amendment Bill in the thirteenth Lok Sabha (Khanna, 2009). There is a very wide gap between women's rights; their realization and representation. Women are under represented in decision-making, political parties, legislation and so on. Electoral politics have been very significant. Elections have become a vehicle for political change. Despite significance of electoral politics, significant increase in roles has not occurred. Electoral reservation is one important measure used for achieving greater representation.

Conclusion:

Women's position in the society can be strengthened only by ensuring equal participation of both men and women. Participation not only in the political sphere but also in every sphere; political, social and economic. Women have been for long overlooked in the

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process of development. As has been discussed in the paper, equality and development of women will not be ensured unless and until women are included in the decision making process. Moreover, to ensure women's equal participation, we need to get rid of the patriarchal norms that control the functioning of our society. Patriarchy should not be regarded as an 'insurmountable ghost' but must be fought back. Our society is very much ingrained in patriarchal norms and our laws have been inadequate to challenge this system. Education, development of scientific outlook, legal safeguards, enlightenment of men and awareness of their own potential by women are the effective forces in this direction. By strengthening women's leadership, building up their self-confidence and morale and equipping them with information the situation can be changed.

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