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Political Empowerment of Indian women: A Distant Dream

Abstract

The post-independent India has witnessed a significant improvement in socio-economic status of women, but their political status still remains far from satisfactory. Women remain unrepresented at all levels of political process and their political empowerment seems to be a distant dream. It is being felt that women should unite as a separate political entity and they should be sensitized about the issues confronting them. There is also a need to promote sensitivity among men through our education system. This paper seeks to examine the level of political empowerment of Indian women at various levels of political process, reasons behind their under-representation and possible remedies to improve their status.

Keywords: Political Empowerment, Women Empowerment, Campaign, Testimony, Patriarchal, Sensitivity, Sensibility

Introduction

We, the people of India, feel proud of being the largest democracy of the world where all the adult population of the country enjoy equal right to participate in the political process through right to vote and right to contest elections. Yet, it is a matter of shame that even after sixty six years of independence we are among one of the most gender skewed democracies of the world. Women remain unrepresented at every level of political process and this is despite the growth of political consciousness among them over the years. This paper is an attempt to examine reasons behind under representation of women in the political system of the country and how their present status can be improved.

Efforts for Women Empowerment

There is no denying the fact that in the post independence period a lot of efforts have been made to improve the legal, political, educational and social status of women in India, but with limited success. Even in the pre-independence period, the question of the improvement of the position of women had been at the heart of the social reform movement from the first quarter of the nineteenth century when Ram Mohan Roy started his questioning of social orthodoxy. The political participation by women in the massive popular struggles from the twenties onwards opened up new vistas of possibilities that a century of social reform could not. In this respect Gandhiji's statement in the mid-thirties to Mridula Sarabhai, a valiant fighter for his causes of women and freedom is significant. He said "I have brought the Indian women out of the kitchen, it is up to you to see that they don't go back".¹ In fact, the national movement by treating women as political beings resolved many doctrinal debates about the desirability of women's role in the public sphere. Women had participated in all streams of the national movement from the Gandhian to socialist to communist to revolutionary terrorist. They had founded separate women's organizations as well; the All-India women's conference, founded in 1926, being the most important of these.²

After independence, our constitution promised complete equality to women. It gave them right to vote and right to contest elections, along with men, without any qualification of education or property or income. A right for which women suffrages fought long and hard in many western countries was won at one stroke by Indian women. In 1993, the Panchayati Raj bill was passed which reserved one third of the seats in the panchayats for women. Despite these efforts, however, the fact remains that women in general play a marginal role in the political landscape of our country. Although some of our women have occupied prominent positions in public life. Mention in this respect may be made of Sarojini Naidu, Vijaylakshmi Pandit, Sucheta Kriplani, Indira Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, Sushma Swaraj, Jialalita, Mayawati, Mamta Banerjee, and so on. However, women remain underrepresented at every level starting from the electorate to elected



U.K.Jha

Associate Prof. & Head
Deptt. Of Political Sc.
D.P.B.S.(P.G.)college
Anoopshahr, Bulandshahr

Asian Resonance

representatives and their representation in the legislature is among the lowest in the world.

Women in Lok Sabha

The representation of women in Lok Sabha has increased from 22 seats in the 1952 election to 61 seats in 2014, however gender disparity remain skewed as nine out of ten parliamentarians 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.

Table 1
Representation of women in Lok Sabha(1952-2014)

Note:- * including one nominated member

Lok Sabha	Total No. of seats (Elections held)	No. of women Members who Won	% of the total
First(1952)	489	22	4.4
Second(1957)	494	27	5.4
Third(1962)	494	34	6.7
Fourth(1967)	523	31	5.9
Fifth(1971)	521	22	4.2
Sixth(1977)	544	19	3.4
Seventh(1980)	544	28	5.1
Eighth(1984)	544	44	8.1
Ninth(1989)	529	28	5.3
Tenth(1991)	509	36	7.0
Eleventh(1996)	541	40*	7.4
Twelfth(1998)	545	44*	8.0
Thirteenth(1999)	543	48*	8.8
Fourteenth(2004)	543	45*	8.1
Fifteenth(2009)	543	59	10.9
Sixteenth(2014)	543	61	11.2

Source: Election Commission of India

However, an analysis of the success rate of women candidates as compared to men reveals that it has been higher in the last three general elections. In 2014, the success rate of women was 9 percent as compared to men at 6 percent.

The under-representation of women in the Lok Sabha, and from crucial decision making positions such as in the cabinet, are pointers of their systematic exclusion from the political structure and the deeply embedded gender biases in Indian society. Though women head a significant number of national and state level political parties, the overall representation of women within the rank and file of these parties is dismal.

Women who have made their presence felt in inner – party circles have also been relegated to the second rung of leadership and have failed to breach the glass ceiling. They rarely play any role in formulating policies and strategies in political parties and are at best assigned the job of keeping an eye on women's issues and mobilizing them if need be for electoral benefits for their parties.

Table 2
Seats allotted to women by national parties in general elections.

National Parties	2004		2009		2014	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
All India	355	45	556	59	668	61
Congress	45	12	43	23	57	04
BJP	30	10	44	13	37	28
Others	280	23	469	23	574	29

Source: Election Commission of India

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. This 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. 3

Under representation in States

The picture is not very different in the state legislatures. Indeed, in many assembly elections not a single woman has got elected. Even in states like Kerala, Uttarakhand, Nagaland and Meghalaya, where women are perceived to be more empowered, the proportion of women in assemblies is worse than Lok Sabha's best of 11%

Nagaland is an extreme example where not a single woman has been elected to the 60 member assembly in the last 50 years. Even the number of women contesting is low, touching four just once, compared to roughly 200 male contestants. This is despite the fact that the turnout of women voters has almost always been higher in the state than of men. This trend seems to hold true for many states of the north-east such as Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and

Asian Resonance

Meghalaya. In these states, the number of women contestants has never crossed 25 compared to hundreds of male contestants. And the highest number of seats won by women in any of these states was in 2013 when four won in Meghalaya.

Even Himachal and Uttarakhand which have relatively high women's work participation, the proportion of women in the assembly touched its highest point, 9% and 8% respectively, just once. Kerala, which has the highest sex ratio among major states, came close to the Lok Sabha in proportion of women representatives in 1996, but has generally averaged about 6%.

Of the hundreds of Chief Ministers since independence, just 14 have been women. Even among them, most of the female political leaders, were related to or closely associated with male political heavyweights. 4

Comparison with other Countries

A comparison with other parts of world shows that the worst record in representation of women in the lower house is in the pacific region where it is just 13.4% and India's record is even lower at less than 11%. Nordic countries hold the best record, with women constituting 42% of the single house or lower house.

Table 3
Women Parliamentarians compared to Neighboring Countries.

Countries	Percentage	World Ranking
Nepal	33.2	24
China	23.4	55
Pakistan	20.7	66
Bangladesh	19.7	71
India	10.8	108
Sri Lanka	5.8	131

Source: Inter Parliamentary Union, 2013

Note:- The figures represent only Lower Chamber or single chamber. It does not include the sixteenth Lok Sabha election results In case of India.

Patriarchal thinking in Politics.

The main reason behind the under representation of women in our country is the patriarchal thinking of our political parties. Almost all political parties talk about 'common man' but not common woman'. In their agenda, the issues relating to women are kept in the backyard. And the main reason is that no political party treats women 'as vote banks.' Their thinking is that women generally vote as per the directions of the male members of their family. They try to entice women only occasionally, but are not interested in their political empowerment. This is evident from the fact that women reservation bill has been introduced in the Parliament four times, but has not been passed so far. Once it gets passed, 33% of seats in Lok Sabha would be reserved for women. Although some political parties argue that it will increase the dominance of only women coming from urban areas and upper strata of society and the rural women would continue to remain on margin. But this

argument is just a pretext to preserve the male dominance in the national politics. 5

What can be Done?

To my mind, the time has come when women should unite as a separate political entity. In this respect a move has already been made in Varansi where a group of enterprising women have formed an all woman political outfit- the Bhartiya Awam party (Rashtriya). They want to 'usher in change in the male-dominated political system. Although, the party has skipped this year's Lok Sabha polls, it will field candidates in the next UP polls.

According to Najma Parveen, President of the party "We are working for women's empowerment in all fields, including politics. Women make up half the country's population, yet their representation on the national political spectrum is negligible."6

The party promises 10% quota for men. So far over 35000 women, mostly Muslims, have joined the party after it came into existence on January 23,2013, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose's birth anniversary. The poll panel registered it on January 9, 2014.

Nazneen Ansari, the general secretary of the party says" since most women are not members of a party, they are indifferent to political ideologies. Their voting choices are dominated by men in their families. We want to make them politically aware."

The party is getting over-whelming response and have received over 50000 receipts for primary membership. It goes to show that women can assert their identity in political sphere by displaying their solidarity nationally and by making proper exercise of their right to vote.

There is also a need to sensitize men about women's needs and their issues. According to spiritual Guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, "Our education has stuffed us with so much information and facts, but has made us dry and devoid of sensitivity. In life, we need two things: sensibility and sensitivity. Sensibility is of the intellect and a lot has been done in developing that. But not much has been done to make people sensitive." So, we need to do a lot on this front. We must understand the fact that no political system can become stable and responsive, it is does not provide adequate representation to all sections of society and more so to the women who constitute nearly 49% of our total population .

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