

Women Empowerment in Indian Democracy

Abstract

India is the largest democracy in the world. Article 15 of the Constitution of India advocates equal status for both men and women without any discrimination. Even after the constitutional provisions, in Indian society yet women have been considered inferior to men both in socio-economic and political system. The family status in Indian context is judged on account of male seniority and not of the female. Since independence, realising the needs of women empowerment, special emphases were laid on the practical needs of women. Its purpose was to bring women into development as passive beneficiaries of development. The vision of inclusive democracy in our country should not be just participation in elections through voting by the people, but it should be inclusiveness in economic, social and political spheres for all the sections of the society. There should be increased emphasis on ensuring the participation of women in the meetings of local bodies at all levels. This is needed to promote and enhance their leadership qualities and self-confidence. However, their participation is not true to its sprits but as a compliance to the statutory requirements. As such, it has been felt, that women must participate in all functional areas of decision making exercising equal status with their counter-parts.

Keywords: Women, Empowerment, Participation, Governance, Awareness, Knowledge

Introduction

Political empowerment for women is regarded as a key driver for economic and social empowerment. The Constitutional amendments (73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments) brought about significant changes in the political scenario of the country with regard to women's participation in politics. However, in India, attempts to secure political representation in higher political arenas have not been successful. Fresh impetus is required with a modern approach. Indian democracy is 68 years old, yet the participation of women in politics has not significantly increased since the days of the freedom movement.

The lack of proportionate representation of women in decision-making process results in neglecting the rights and privileges of women, which restrict them from negotiating for important portfolios such as finance, home, defence, etc., which are generally termed as key portfolios and primarily controlled by men. It has been observed that women are allotted soft portfolios such as those related to women and children, information and culture, social welfare, etc which are relatively less important and have correspondingly lesser resources both financial and human. Women politicians point out that even within the political parties, women are rarely found in leadership positions. In fact, women candidates are usually fielded from 'losing' constituencies, where the party does not want to 'waste' a male candidate. Bringing women into politics through the Panchayat Raj Institutions system (PRI) was a positive step towards eliminating gender discrimination. Crucially, PRI has helped to change women's perceptions of themselves. Women have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources, officials and, most of all, by challenging men. PRI has also given many women a greater understanding of the politics, in particular the importance of political parties. PRI has helped to change local government beyond simply increasing the numerical presence of women.

Aim of the Study

1. To study the proportionate participation of women in different areas of decision making process in India.
2. To study the women empowerment in the political process after constitutional arrangements made for their participation in the grass root level political institutions like PRIs.

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3. To study why women empowerment lacks in other areas except in PRIs.

Conceptual Framework of Women Empowerment

The Indian patriarchal society that dominates the social, political and economic life of people in the country has never encouraged its women in any other field, except kitchen. Indian women are relatively disempowered and they enjoy lower status than that of men from times immemorial. Gender gap exists regarding access to education and employment. It is found that acceptance of unequal gender norms by women are still prevailing in the society. Only few women have acknowledged spending their earning. Control over cash earnings increases with age, education, status and place of residence. Women's exposure to media is also less than that of men; least said the better with regard to their political participation.

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive steps in favour of women. Empowerment is one of the key factors in determining their success. Their development, status and position would elevate them in the society. Women are considered to be more honest, meticulous, and efficient and thus more and more companies prefer hiring them for better performance. But still, the state and society seem to be lagging behind in offering them the required political status, even though efforts have been taken to provide proportionate participation in various political forums through legal enactments.

The Women Reservation Bill by the legislature is a step towards compulsory and proportionate participation of women in political process of the country. Increased political participation of women will help them fight against the abuse, discrimination, and inequality they suffer from. Its promoters say that the Bill was essential for active political participation of women. They also say that it would lead to gender equality in Parliament, resulting in the political empowerment of women as a whole. However, the opponents argue that the reservation would only help women of elitist nature. Till date, the Women's Reservation Bill has not received due and consensus attention of all political parties, as a result of which the Bill is pending for years together for being passed by both the houses of the parliament to become a legislation. It has always triggered heated debates both within Parliament and outside. The proposed Bill drafted by the H. D. Deve Gowda-led United Front government provides a reservation of 33.3 percent of the total seats in the Parliament and State legislatures for women. The Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha on September 12, 1996. Although it has been introduced in Parliament several times, the Bill could not be passed because of lack of political consensus.

The Indian government has raised reservations for women in all tiers of the Panchayat Raj System from 33 to at least 50%. The Union Cabinet, presided over by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, cleared a proposal to amend Article 243(D) of the Constitution for this purpose on August 27, 2009.

Prime Minister's Initiative on Participations of Women in Indian Democracy

The then Prime Minister Dr. Monmohan Singh, while addressing the Women's Leadership Summit, claimed that his government was committed to social, economic and political empowerment of women. Further, he decried the low female literacy rate as well as the maternal mortality rate besides the extremely low sex-ratio. "The gender disparity on the economic front is reflected in the low female work participation rate of 25.7% as compared to 51.0% for males". The Prime Minister further said, "While we have shown improvement in these indicators over the years, the progress has been much slower than what we would have liked". Incidentally, the reservation for women in local bodies has revolutionised governance at the grass-roots level. Thus, the society is ready to providing one-third reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislatures in the days to come. He had admitted that the government was moving towards providing one-third reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislatures. As a result of which the Women's Reservation Bill providing for 33% reservation of seats for women was placed before both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha.

This Bill has been passed by the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Parliament in March 2010. It needs to be passed by the Lok Sabha and the at least fifty per cent of all State Legislative Assemblies, it is put before the President of India for her approval. Women, reservation bill will still have to wait until our very own representatives learn some activates and manners to let the rule of prevail and parliamentary decorum be maintained. It is just the beginning of women emancipation. Once women get 33 per cent representation, they will take a next step forward towards getting at par representation with their male counterparts.

Political Empowerment of Women in India: Report of UNDP

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report released offers six-point action plan that includes a whole range of structural changes in the electoral politics to bridge the gender gap. It strongly pleads quota for women in parliament. The action plan recommended by the report includes constitutional reforms, changes in the pattern of electoral campaign and its financing, provision of reservation of seats, change in party selection rules, capacity building on policy and programs and gender sensitive rules in elected bodies.

The UNDP report, 'Gender Equality in Elected Office in Asia-Pacific: Six Actions to Expand Women's Empowerment', says that "globally, women hold slightly less than 20 per cent of seats in Parliament. In Asia-Pacific, just over 18 per cent of all members of national Parliaments are women". The leading countries in the region for women's membership in Parliament are New Zealand and Nepal, where women are one-third of all members of Parliament.

India is far below these countries with 11 per cent women in the Lower House. "Despite frequent attempts to introduce a similar policy of reserved seats for the Lower House (Lok Sabha) of the national Parliament, these initiatives

have repeatedly failed. With 60 women members of Parliament out of 545 (11 per cent), nationally, India's Lower House ranks only 105th worldwide," says the report. "Among the Asia-Pacific countries with the highest proportions of women in Parliament in 2010, most had constitutional, legal or party quotas. By contrast, among the 20 Asia-Pacific countries lagging behind in growth, none had implemented. Even in the 16th Lok Sabha the total number of women elective representatives is 66 from among the total number of 545(12.1 percent).

Components of Women Empowerment

1. Women's sense of self-worth;
2. Their right to have access to opportunities and resources;
3. Their right to have and determine the choices;
4. Their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home;
5. Their ability to influence the direction of social change nationally and internationally; and
6. Their ability to express their own ideas and view.

Women gain empowerment only when both men and women recognise that the women should be respected and the society should contribute to empower them. When all men and women respect

women and accept their contributions whole heartedly there is no doubt that women empowerment gains momentum in India. In our country, generally in the panchayat elections, near relatives of a contested candidate play a significant role rather than political party and its ideology or quality of the candidate. In the rural area people from the same kinship live together in a village, so the candidate who has more near relatives from the same kinship in the village can secure more votes than other candidates who have less number of near relatives of the same kinship.

Gender Balance

According to the United Nations Report "the significance of gender for policy outcomes; in particular, village councils headed by women invested more in public infrastructure concerning provision of clean water, while village councils headed by men invested more in job provisions".

With 50 per cent of members at rural and district bodies, India has achieved a better gender balance at sub-national level. However, the report of United Nations Report (UNP) has lauded the "consequences for including women in India" in local bodies. It underlines its role in "altering policy priorities.

(As Per Gender Balance in Women's Participation in the Lok Sabha Elections)

S. No.	Voters	Lok Sabha (2014)	Lok Sabha (2009)
1	Total Votes Polled in the Lok Sabha Elections	55.38 crore	41.7 crore
2	Total Electorate	83.41 crore	71.69 crore
3	Total Voter Turnout percentage	66.4 % (Highest Ever)	58.19%
4	Women Turnout (as percentage of total women electors)	65.63 %	55.82%
5	Male Turnout	67.09%	60.24
6	Gender Gap	1.46 percentage points (Lowest ever)	4.42 percentage points

Source: Election Commission of India, 2014

1. 55.38 crore voters cast their vote in LS 2014. 41.73 crore votes were cast in LS 2009. This is an increase of voters by 32.71 % over voters in 2009.
2. Female turnout (a major SVEEP objective) stands at 65.63 % in current LS against 55.82% in 2009. (Male turnout at 67.09% in 2014 and 60.24% in 2009)
3. The gender gap now stands reduced at 1.46 percentage points against more than 4 percentage points in 2009.

Political Participation and Women Empowerment

There is low representation of women at all levels of political institutions. Women still face major obstacles in seeking higher positions in society. Political participation is a human right, recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Women are poorly represented at different levels of political life and decision-making. Thus, there is widespread neglect of women's priorities by politicians and bureaucrats. As per the Human Development Report, 1999 women hold only 12.7 percent of the world's parliamentary seats and only 8.7 percent of those in the least developed countries. In India, the process of politically empowering through reservation in the local bodies has helped in the wider mobilization. On many

occasions, elected women have provided the leadership for organizing women and get their legitimate demands fulfilled like, widow pensions, gas connections, etc. There is a growing realization among the women that local elections are a means to bring positive change in their lives. In different parts of the country, the SHGs have jointly put a women candidate for the election in the local bodies such as Zila Parishad, Gram Panchayat, etc. Women are motivated to change the traditions. The women's political campaigns refer to solving the issues that affect their daily lives like safe drinking water, schools, health centres, roads, etc. some women have taken the agenda further by displaying a mature understanding of the contexts in which the political economy functions. In our society men, having attitudes resist the political empowerment of women. There is a feeling that women should only contest the reserved seats and not the general seats. In some parts of our country, there is some change, for example, women in the villages of the Hill State of Uttaranchal are waging their own political battle of assertion and articulation of identification. Several NGOs working in the area tries to educate women about the voting behaviour and election procedures. Elected women members learn to negotiate their

newfound positions in an inherently male dominated system, fighting the adverse institutionalized practices like, corruption. Women face many obstacles while contesting election such as sabotage, threats, boycott and pressure from family. However, women on gaining the political power can bring rapid change in the lives of other women and attain equality.

Empowerment evaluation and strategy of empowering women Empowerment evaluation is the basis of empowering women and community development. Empowerment evaluation reflects the process of participatory communication. SHG formation, popular education and political participation are all based on the process of participatory communication. Empowerment evaluation as a capacity building process is based on the principles of participatory inquiry research and evaluation. Its objective is to highlight community member's own knowledge and to empower them. This can be attained by participating the women in each stage of program development that is, need assessment program, objectives, implementation monitoring and evaluation. Empowerment evaluation would promote self-determination and community control. The traditional evaluation is done by the professional experts, usually for funding of the organization. It is a close decision-making process and community participation is limited to providing feedback. In the empowerment or participatory evaluation there is shared responsibility and decision making power lies with the participants. In the empowerment evaluation participants not only are evolved but also control the process.

Despite its focus on self-determination and collaboration empowerment evaluation and traditional external evaluation are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the empowerment evolution process produces a rich data source that enables a more complete external examination. Self-determination defines as the ability to decide one's own course in life, forms the basis of empowerment evaluation. It consist of numerous interconnected capabilities such as the ability to identify and express needs, establish goals or expectations and plan of action to achieve them, identify resources, make rational choices from various alternative, take appropriate steps to pursue the objectives and evaluate the results. Women face resistance because a traditional social structures, norms and values. NGOs can facilitate the process by training the people. Training, facilitation, advocacy and liberation are the facets of empowerment. Liberation means being freed or freeing oneself from pre-existing roles and constraints. It often involves conceptualization of oneself and others. Empowerment evaluation can also be liberating, as women liberate them from traditional expectations and roles, find new opportunities in perceiving existing resources in al new light, and redefine their identities and future roles. Empowerment evaluation is a long-term process resulting improvement of quality of life of community with support from development agencies.

Table 2

Representation of Women in Lok Sabha 1952-2014

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

Note: * Including one nominated member

Traditionally the participation of women in the percentage of won in the election compared to each year there is a steady increase in the participation of election. If we see the participation of women in election from first Lok Sabha election 1952 to 2014 till today there was a great difference between the percentages of women participation.

Conclusion

The most critical component of women's empowerment is found to be education. It leads to improved economic growth, low fertility rate, health and sanitation and an awareness of factors that disempowered women. Work participation rate and political participation also grows in women's education. Women's health is an important component of women's empowerment. However, the achievement levels in providing better health care and safe motherhood for women are not encouraging. All citizens should have the same opportunity to participate in political affairs regardless of gender, race and other identities. Therefore, the entry of women into political institutions is an issue of equality. For a healthy political system and welfare of the people, it is important that women must come forward and perform a vital role in political activities because of more opportunities to participate in the political process will enhance their economic and organisational capacities. With proportionate participation, they can gain more self confidence and make attempt for better share in the political system. Thus, their participation is vital for strengthening the democratic system of any society.

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Remarking

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