
WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS- KEY TO DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: In the modern age, women have proved their worth in almost all fields and politics is no exception. Though the Indian culture has not favoured women many a times, the ice is gradually breaking. Indian politics has seen the rise of many women who have made their presence felt in the governance of the nation. But then most of these women belong to the elite group which has facilitated their easy entry into politics. It is not this easy in the case of women who belong to the lower strata of the society.

Women in India continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women.

This theoretical paper tries to analyze the present day status of women and concentrates on the various issues related to the participation of women in politics. It explains the importance of their participation in politics and the positive impact it can have on the society. It highlights the role of women in politics and the transformation it promises to bring into the society.

Thus the paper attempts to emphasize on the importance of women in politics and also points out the various factors that discourage the participation of women in politics. It also explains the various elements that can promote their participation in politics and suggestions are also made in this regard. As the study is analytical in nature, secondary data has been employed. The basic data are derived from journals, books and websites.

Keywords: Indian politics, participation, women.

Introduction: Women comprise of about fifty percent of the world population and they almost form sixty percent of the labour force in the world. In India, they almost make up fifty percent of the labour force, mainly in the agricultural sector. Despite their immense contributions to the society they have only been sidelined¹. Women are under-represented in governments around the world, holding approximately only six percent of ministerial positions². Conditions are worse in the case of India where women would have to counteract the reactionary feudal forces, whose dead weight is still enormous and would also have to evolve political institutions which would assure in concrete form, the equal status of women and also unfettered and full opportunities to participate as free citizens in the society³. There is no denying the fact that women in India have made a considerable progress and we can always boast of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the woman Prime Minister who served the longest period in world history, but it can never be denied that the women from the lower strata of the society still have to struggle against many social evils in the male dominated society. We have entered an era when women are accepted as voters but not leaders.

Status Of Indian Women: The status of women in India has been changing constantly due to the social, economic and political condition of that time. During the ancient period, they were treated equal to men, but their status deteriorated during the medieval period. Then came an era when equal rights for women were claimed by many social reformers including Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Women entered the political arena in great numbers during the struggle

for independence. Mahatma Gandhi reached out to the women and appealed to them to play a great role in the struggle. But the fact to be understood is that those who held key positions in the Indian National Movement belonged to the elite class and not much has been written about those infamous women from poor and rural backgrounds who also contributed immensely to the movement⁴. The years after independence saw the emergence of a few women who left an indelible mark in the history of Indian politics. But again, they were mostly women who belonged to the higher strata of the society. Behind most successful women leaders in India, there was always the hidden hand of man⁵. The women who belong to the lower strata of the society still reel under the socio-cultural and religious restrictions. The Constitution has taken all efforts to bring in gender equality and with the implementation of Minimum Wages Act, Equal Remuneration Act, Maternity Benefits Act etc, the vision of the Constitution should have come true. But unfortunately, these Acts have not served their purpose due to various social and cultural reasons and most importantly, the lack of political will has crushed the vision of the Constitution to establish a society without gender discrimination⁶.

Thus the status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. On one hand, she is at the peak of the ladder of success and on the other hand, she suffers the violence inflicted on her by her own family members. Indian women face an array of problems which include malnutrition resulting in poor health, illiteracy, maternal mortality, ill treatment, denial of access to political power and participation etc⁷.

Despite their deteriorating status, the fact to be understood is that women have a crucial role to play in the modern Indian society. The UN General Secretary said, "When ethnic tensions exacerbate conflict, women build bridges rather than walls. When considering the impact and implications of war and peace, women first think of children and their future, before themselves. Let us harness this power of women for peace"⁸.

Importance of Political Participation of Women in India: The participation of women in the decision-making process would lead to the betterment of the entire society. If democracy is to be sustained, the women who are almost fifty percent of the total population should be given their due share of power⁹. Hence do people wait anxiously for the Women Reservation Bill. This is also the reason why the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts facilitated the entry of women into the panchayati raj institutions but the real question is whether these women are the true decision-makers. Thus the space for women in the political arena and their participation in politics has been limited to family connections rather than convictions and commitment. Women have been promoted to political positions only when male members are not in a position to occupy those positions¹⁰.

Despite these issues, it is to be understood that the participation of women in Indian politics is the need of the hour for reasons more than one. The success of Indian democracy would depend upon the fuller participation of all its citizens¹¹. Hence women cannot be ignored nor can they be sidelined. Women leaders can initiate, formulate and implement policies for the betterment of their gender. They also bring in a feminine perspective to the process of planning, policy formulation and execution of development programmes. Political participation would also strengthen their innate capacities through acquiring knowledge, power and experience. Women can also bring in socio-economic transformation in the rural society as they have the potential for effective networking. They understand their problems better, know the priorities and preferences and are also aware of the solutions. Most of all, political participation would enable women to gain experience, overcome their fear and anxiety, thereby breaking the shackles of patriarchy and orthodoxy¹².

Barriers to the Political Participation of Women: Many studies undertaken on the political participation of women have proved that women are not independent voters because their decisions are mostly influenced by male members of the family. And also because of illiteracy, most of them lack political information, awareness and consciousness¹³. Hence, unequal access to information is a barrier to women participation in politics. It impairs the

recognition and enjoyment of the rights of women to vote and contest elections¹⁴. Further, women have multiple roles to play and they are overburdened with domestic work which prevents their full-fledged entry into politics. In a highly hierarchical society, caste and class have also played their role by providing only lesser access to public forums for women belonging to lower caste and class. Also with the meager income that women earn, it becomes totally impossible for them to face the election expenditures. Money and muscle power also prevents women from entering politics as it instills fear in their minds. Violating the dignity of women has become an integral part of politics. When women try to be active, articulate and assertive they have been subjected to threats and intimidation. Moreover, patriarchal values have only taught the society to look with suspicion the women who have stepped out of their shells to enter into the political arena. Character assassination is targeted at women who demonstrate potential for leadership. Political parties are also very reluctant to transfer power to women and they are less willing to support women candidates as they strongly believe that women cannot draw votes nor can they govern with efficiency¹⁵. The political participation of women depends upon the level of education, background and perceptions. Constitutional provisions are only an initial step which should be followed by effective measures for the upliftment of women. To make the political participation of women a reality, enormous work remains to be done, given their present status¹⁶.

Qualitative Participation of Women in Politics-The Way Forward: Women are apathetic to politics mainly because of their low status in society, lesser exposure to education, low economic status, restraining cultural norms, unhealthy political environment and the nature of political structure¹⁷. Adequate representation in the representative bodies are needed for women empowerment in the political arena¹⁸. Stricter implementation of reservation policies can go a long way in the emancipation of the group that has suffered exploitation for centuries¹⁹. But however, mere reservation will not serve the purpose as qualitative participation of women representatives are distorted due to other internal and external factors. There needs to be an overall willingness on the part of the State machinery to incorporate gender agendas as well as the appointment of officers who would be sensitive to the issues of women²⁰.

Support services can also be made available to help women actively participate in politics. Training strategies for the participation of women in politics can be developed in the following areas: advocacy in gender awareness, capacity-building through networking, negotiation skills, management, constituency-building, budget analysis, gender

mainstreaming skills, use of mass media, political and voter education, planning for engaging younger generation etc²¹. As elections are fought on party lines, it has become more expensive and infact more corrupt. So special funds can be raised at the district level to help women honestly fight elections. Political literacy manuals explaining the rights of women in simple language can be circulated among the rural women by the non-governmental organizations in the locality. Resource centres can also be set up with social activists taking up the work of encouraging and educating the women on political participation. They should be encouraged to join important political organizations and strive to occupy key positions in those organizations. Organizations and institutions that strive for the betterment of women should be unified so that they push forward their agenda with more force and determination²². Political parties can

also contribute through gender conscious policies on their agendas and implementing them within their ranks. Most of all, effective leadership among women should come from within their ranks and it is they who have to battle the patriarchal society with courage and confidence²³.

Conclusion: Therefore, a democracy works well only when all its citizens including the most marginalized groups have the capacity to ask questions, seek accountability from the State and participate in the process of governance. The quality of the democratic process depends on the capability and integrity of the organs of the State, institutions of governance and the extent of people's participation in governance²⁴. So it becomes the responsibility of the State to devise methods and strategies for the fuller participation of women or otherwise Indian democracy can never be called a success.

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