

Women participation in politics



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"Every country deserves to have the best possible leader and that means that women have to be given a chance to compete. If they're never allowed to compete in the electoral process then the countries are really robbing themselves of a great deal of talent."

- Madeleine K. Albright, NDI Chairman

Women's leadership and effective participation is increasingly on the development agenda of governments, bilateral and multilateral agencies, and nongovernmental organizations, including women's rights groups. Evidence from programmes and research demonstrates the important role women play as key actors and decision-makers in the development process across a wide range of sectors. In the political arena in particular, there is growing momentum among governments to foster and ensure women's participation and leadership in governance structures. Establishing quotas for women's representation at different levels of governance has been a strategic tactic in achieving this goal in many countries.

Equitable participation of women in politics and government is essential to building and sustaining democracy. Comprising over 50 percent of the world's population, women continue to be under-represented as voters, political leaders and elected officials. Democracy cannot truly deliver for all of its citizens if half of the population remains underrepresented in the political arena.

Democracy implies equality for all human persons, men and women. As against this basic notion of democracy what normally seen is that women are excluded from different walks of life, more visibly in Politics. The U.N. observes that women constitute "world's largest excluded category". For the attainment of true democratic spirit better political participation should be ensured. "In the struggle for gender justice", Usha Narayanan argues, "political participation constitutes the first and foremost step in that direction." In order to assess and evaluate the level and extent of political participation of women, the

study of the nature and functioning of the political system becomes very much relevant as a whole. Women participation is particularly more beneficial to political parties and political leaders due to the natural qualities of women such as honesty, affection and sense of duty. The mobilization of women in large numbers weakened the bondage of tradition and encouraged them to develop a perspective on the wider socio-political problems. Equal treatment to women in political life, should start from the grassroots level. To provide training and practice in the process of decision-making, the rural democratic institutions are the ideal structures to begin with. One of the aims of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is to accomplish this purpose. "The question of political empowerment of women in rural India has assumed considerable significance recently because of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The amendment provides reservation of seats and posts of chairperson for women in all grassroots level democratic institutions in the countryside known as panchayats. This is a historic step of far reaching implications and significant repercussions on the political process in rural "India".

The constitution of free India has guaranteed all its citizens justice, liberty, equality and dignity through several provisions like documents of fundamental rights and directive principles. The constitution of India is the best in the world which has taken care of the underprivileged and the minorities. All our laws get their sanction from this constitution and any law which violates a provision of the constitution is declared unconstitutional. The framers of the constitution realize that a true democracy requires not only equality but

also justice. This notion resulted in the Indian constitution, which not only grants equality to women but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women for neutralizing the cumulative socio-economic, educational and political disadvantages faced by them.

Therefore, Several articles are incorporated in the constitution in order to materialize the desired objective of equality and justice for the women in India. Besides the preamble, the articles of the constitution, which impinge on our subject of enquiry are Articles 14,15,16 under part 111, Articles 39, 42, 44 under part IV, Article 5 1 - A(c) under part IV A and Article 246 under part XI are noteworthy. The right to vote can be said to be the starting point in the struggle of women for their political equality and participation. An analysis of the political participation of women by way of voting has been growing but with variations.

The recent constitutional amendment Acts provided greater opportunities to women in various aspects of political life. More recently in 2009, the Government of India approved a 50 percent reservation for women in PRIs; and many states, including Rajasthan and Odisha, have passed similar legislation. The same amendment also calls for PRIs to "prepare and implement plans for economic development and social justice. The affirmative action of reservation for women within PRIs provides an opportunity for women's entry into the political arena. But the representation of women in the Lok Sabha as well as Rajya Sabha is very low when compared with their voting strength. Their numerical strength is also marginal in decision-making bodies. Only a very limited number of women have succeeded in getting berths in the Council of Ministers.

Thus it seems clear that the actual political power remained something of a male domain and only few crumbs are thrown to women. Women are unjustifiably rare in the decision-making bodies. Moreover, if anybody is elected to such bodies they will have to struggle hard to be counted for notable posts. This is the real situation that exists in India in terms of political participation of women. Throughout the world, one allegation is that women are treated as second class citizens. Often they

are treated as subordinate to man almost in every place.

The United Nations Organization gave special attention to the empowerment of women. Its decade of Women's Development (1975-1985) generated a lot of interest throughout the world. India also took special interests towards the problems of women. At this juncture, a number of women organizations came into being and started fighting for women's causes. They took a positive approach that they should be perceived as dignified human beings instead of being treated as objects of pity.

However, there was no meaningful effort to provide satisfactory representation for women in the legislative, executive and other similar bodies. Some cosmetic steps have been taken by both the Central and State governments just to ensure the women vote bank for election purposes. It was in this background that in September 1991, the Congress Government under P.V. Narasimha Rao introduced the 73rd (Panchayats) and 74th (NagarPalikas) constitutional amendment bills in the parliament. The Lok Sabha passed the bills on 22nd December, 1992 and the Rajya Sabha, the following day. Following the ratification by more than half of the State Assemblies, the President gave his assent on 20th April 1993, and the acts were brought into force by a government notification on 24th April 1993 as the 1992 constitution (Seventy Third and Seventy Fourth) Amendment Acts. The Acts provide for one-third reservation of seats and offices of chairperson to women in the local self-government institutions throughout the country.

It is in this backdrop that the relevance and significance of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts which include provisions for women's empowerment in terms of reservation of seats and offices of chairperson in Panchayati Raj and Nagarapalika institutions should be examined. Despite the fact that the above said Acts are confined to the grassroots levels symbolized by the Panchayati Raj and Nagarapalika institutions, their impact on national politics and women's empowerment with unpredictable ramifications has produced a democratic revolution wherein women are given a golden opportunity to prove their administrative skills at

par with men. The performance of women as elected representatives and chairpersons has proved beyond the shadow of doubt that they are not behind men in administrative skills, organizational capacities and political insights which were hitherto considered the monopoly of men. The new surge in women's empowerment and awakening proved good for the nation which in the near future may allot more seats to women in State and Central Legislatures. Women's claim for one-third reservation of seats in the state and national legislatures may meet with success before long. In the light of this fact an extensive and detailed study on women's representation in the legislatures of both developing and developed countries has brought out the truth that India's record in providing adequate representation to women in legislative bodies, though not satisfactory, is far better and hence cannot be called dismal.

The study of political participation of women requires an undertaking of their social position particularly in terms of educational and health awareness. It is believed that women achieved considerable progress in different walks of life. Here it is to be noted that despite their progress and achievement in educational and health care aspects that still they failed to repeat the same success story in the political field. Education and health are influential factors in determining the socio-political status of a person.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the respectful position granted to women in a substantive and mandatory

manner in the pre and post Aryan period and in the Vedic times, made binding on society by the tenets of religion and observance. Women of later periods spanning between the middle and modern ages have been denied their rightful place of honour owing to a variety of reasons both religious and mundane. Though Indian society has paid scant regards for the education and welfare of women but still it is a pity that the rulers never tried to irritate the orthodox religious beliefs by initiating reform, which would enhance the prestige and status of women. Even the few women who were the frontline leaders of the freedom movement were from rich and educated background and did not represent the backward and downtrodden women of India subjected to all kinds of exploitations and tortures. The leaders of both pre and post independent India paid nothing but lip service to the upliftment of women in various walks of life including rightful representation in the legislatures, both at the centre and in the states. But even now women do not enjoy pride of place in the power centres of legislation, administration and party leadership. It is to be viewed with concern that NGOs which played a dominant role in social renaissance elsewhere in the world with remarkable success, have not paid due attention in India to the cause of women's political participation and empowerment which would have transformed the face of its administration, political culture and sense of values considerably for the better.

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