POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA – PROBLEMS FACED AND HOW IT CAN BE SOLVED

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ABSTRACT

The development of any nation only depends on the status of women in the society. Fifty percent of the world’s population comprises of women. In this male dominated society, women have always suffered. We need to make the women of our country strong socially, economically, psychologically and politically and we need to tell the men of our country about their wrongdoings. The position of women stays the same everywhere. In a country like India, on one hand the goddess is a woman and on the other hand she is ill-treated, oppressed, suppressed, and exploited by the males of our society. The United Nations report states that “woman constitutes half of the world population, perform nearly 2/3 of works hours, receive one tenth of the world’s income and own less than one-hundredth percent of the world’s property.” One of the major problem’s which women are dealing today is with the political participation. Not all women are given the equal rights in the society to choose their desired candidate or stand in elections or go for election campaigns or even be associated with political parties.

This paper aims to examine the current laws and legislations related to political participation of women along with other laws that are in favor of the same. It also takes into consideration various aspects such as history and the global scenario to deal with the political participation of women in India; that is the contribution of great leaders and also countries like Greece and United Kingdom. It also talks about the problems faced by women in getting equal political participation as men. It also addresses the various contributing factors such as lack of education and awareness, poverty, the institution of marriage and the mindset of the people. The researcher has adopted doctrinal method of research relying on a spectrum of legislations, articles, journals and books.

Key-words: women, political participation, patriarchy, laws for political participation, equality
INTRODUCTION

Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details in the activities of man, and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. - Mahatma Gandhi

Politics involves representation, policy, power and position with Government as its area. Political participation refers to the participation of individuals in the political process. It ensures that individuals are able to take part in deciding the common goals of the society and the best ways of achieving it. Political participation means not merely exercising the right to vote, but also power sharing, decision making, policy making at all levels of governance of the State. Political participation refers to actual participation in these voluntary activities by which the members of the society share in selection of rules and formulation of public policy directly or indirectly.¹

The participation of women and their involvement in electoral process is an important marker of the maturity of democracy in any country. It can be defined as equality and freedom with which women share political power with men. Despite various provisions in the constitution, women in the Indian subcontinent continue to be under-represented in the legislatures, both at the national and the state levels. The number of female representatives in legislative bodies in the Centre and in most of the states of India is below 20%, reflecting a pan Indian gender exclusion from electoral participation and quality representation. The Indian female participants in the electoral politics are mainly less because of political party competition, as national political parties and the regional political parties in the states discriminate not only in terms of seat allotments, but also in the party rank and file and chain of command. This is a major contributor to the party competition structure in the Indian politics that is ruled by inherent male dominance and a patriarchal mindset that excludes women from the electoral process.

At the same time, even though India is considered to be a country which follows equality, the lawmakers or the people in the politics are to a certain extent influenced by the old-time rules and customs of male dominance and patriarchy especially when it comes to matters of making laws for the society and governing the people. This poses a problem when it comes to devising efficient

solutions and also creates a dilemma as to what is more important; preserving something that has been practiced for long or making a change and trying methods which shall bring equality in the society. This can be addressed by going back to the origin.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says, “It’s a girl.” –Shirley Chisholm

The roots of the present always lie in the past. So, the justification of the law relating to the political participation of the women can be appropriately scrutinized only by looking into the past history of any system. The way to shed some light on the women’s right of political participation is to look at its past at national as well as global level.

If we see the international history of women’s political participation, the history of equal participation of women in the political fields in a few countries, it can be observed that in ancient Greece and Republican Rome as well as in few more democracies having emerged in Europe, women were completely not given voting rights by the end of the 18th century. In the United States of America, the women in this country were the first ones to fight for their right to vote in the whole world.

If we see the Indian history, women have a record of suffering and exploitation. The women have remained victims of violence and also, they have suffered various types of discrimination, exploitation and torture- both physical and mental not only in the men’s society but also within their own house by their family thereby disturbing the balance in the society. Before Independence, Local Self-Governments have existed in India since. Vedas, Puranas, Smritis and books on statecrafts and religious texts have vivid description of this. In the past, the Panchayati Raj system was confined to solve social problems with the help of five senior members of village called 'Panchas'. The fact that women are capable of exhibiting extraordinary qualities of leadership is visible by the participation of many women during the national freedom movement. There were

2 S. Waseem Ahmad, Nilofer and Gazala Parveen, WOMEN’S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND CHANGING PATTERN OF LEADERSHIP IN RURAL AREAS OF U.P., The Indian Journal of Political Science, Vol. 69, No. 3 (JULY - SEPT., 2008), pp. 661-672
many women who fought during the freedom struggle but some of them who were the prominent women were Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Devi Chattopadhaya, Sucheta Kriplani, Aruna Asif Ali, Kasturba Gandhi and Kamala Nehru. They stand out prominently for their leadership skills.

The demand for women's voting rights was initiated by Sarojini Naidu who led a delegation of Indian Women before the British Parliament in the year 1917. Consulting the Reforms Act of 1921 women were given the right to vote, but this right came with certain restrictions like wifehood, property and education. The Government of India Act of 1935 granted voting rights to all women without any conditions as it was there in the Reforms Act of 1921. Finally, the Constitution of India in the year of 1950 gave all women equal political and legal rights.

THE CURRENT SCENARIO

After the independence and in the current scenario, women are holding important political and administrative offices and portfolios, such as governors, chief ministers, and ministers in cabinet and state governments, presiding officers of legislative bodies, judges of supreme court, high courts and secretaries to the Government of India.

India is one of the first countries in the world to have a woman as the head of the government and as the head of the state. Women in India got the right to equal political participation, much earlier than most of the Western countries, this includes the right to vote.

In the regional level of politics there are few women who have become prominent leaders in their respective states, for instance, Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh, Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu, Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal, Sheila Dixit in New Delhi. They also have significant influence on the national politics. However, we should keep in mind that these women entered politics and were able to achieve this position because of their proximity to male leaders. There have been various law, legislations and amendments which have helped women get equal political representation in the country. Like the 73rd Amendment Act, in the Panchayati Raj system it provides for 33% reservation for women in all the three-tiers. It is a step towards removing the inequality and incapability of women in all tiers of government. The 73rd Amendment is a landmark amendment
in the history of development of women as it a major step towards women's participation in decision making and in political process in the country at least at the grass-root level.

**VARIOUS METHODS IN WHICH WOMEN CAN PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS IN INDIA**

During the old times, political power was in the hands of a few and these people were considered to be as important. In India, women participating in political activities and programs is of recent origin. According to Myron Weiner, “The concept of political participation refers to any voluntary action, successful or unsuccessful, organized or unorganized, episodic or continuous, employing legitimate or illegitimate methods, intended to influence the choice of public policies, the administration of public affairs, or the choice of political leaders at any level of Government, local or national”. Women are still fighting with the society to eradicate the old norms and traditions which stopped women from political participation. The actual interest of women in politics and the extent to which women can participate in politics is explained in the later stages:

(i) Voting Right: Voting is the commonest yet the most important act of political participation. Women constitute half the population of the country, as a result they play an important role in politics of the country, yet they are not given equal importance. There have been a number of schemes which have been initiated for women voters so that they can know the importance of voting. More awareness is required to be created so that women are encouraged to go and cast their vote. This political right to vote is granted to all adult citizens irrespective of their sex from the time the constitution came into power on 26th January 1950 when the first free elections were held. All the votes carry equal weightage whether it is a male vote or a female vote.

(ii) Participation in canvassing, political meetings and agitations: As women became more aware about politics and gained education. The method of personal contact with the voters will help in gaining more votes and support for the political party through political meeting and agitations. Campaigning also helps in getting attention of the people about what the party plans on doing and what are its ideologies. Campaigning often helps people to come and vote who usually do not go and vote. People also actively start working for a party when campaigning begins, they often initiate a political meeting or rally or are a part of it. The people working for a party often contribute
money to the party as they believe that the ideologies of the party and the leadership can help them win in the future and fulfill their needs through the party. Membership of women in these political clubs are really important as through these methods they can represent their group which lacks representation and the public who doesn’t know them. Great leaders like Mayawati and Mamata Bannerjee are the women political leaders who have been Chief Ministers representing their marginalized group and their various interests.

(iii) Membership in any association or political party: Traditionally, only a few women were allowed or were associated to a political party. In Muslims, only elite women were allowed to be a part of the political party. This was mainly because these women came from backgrounds who had a standing in politics or were economically well off. But now the times are changing as due to various socio-political processes more women are taking part in political parties. In today’s date, a woman can be a leader, a social figure and a person a person who can bring a change. Women are victims to various aggression in the society, as a result, women have started forming groups which work for women facing violence and aggressive behavior. There are various NGOs which work for women who also conduct movements to get justice. In the case of Nirbhaya in 2012. Various NGOs came together seeking justice for the girl. Women who are a part of such political parties prefer to work for the betterment of the society. There are various groups which work for the poor by providing them education, financial support, etc., these groups are affiliated to the political parties who on a large scale benefit the whole country.

VARIOUS LAWS AND LEGISLATIONS FOR POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA

There exist a large number of internationally agreed norms and standards related to leadership and political participation of women. United Nations Women’s programs on the political participation and leadership of women are guided by a history of commitments made for women’s participation by all the countries of the world. However, it was during 1970s when the International feminist movement started to gain popularity when the United Nations General Assembly declared 1975 as the International Women’s Year and first World Conference on Women was organized and held in Mexico City. In 1979, the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All
Forms of Discrimination against Women which is often described as an International Bill of Rights for Women. It included commitments under Article 7 on political and public life and Article 8 on representation upholding women’s right to participate in the public life.\(^3\)

In the year 2011, United Nations General Assembly resolution 2011 on women’s political participation told all the member nations of United Nations for taking a variety of measures including to review the differential impact of their electoral systems on the political participation of women. It also encouraged strongly to all political parties for removing all barriers discriminating against the participation of women, it also promoted awareness and recognition of significance of women’s participation in the political process. It investigated allegations of violence, assault or harassment of women elected officials and candidates for political office, to ensure accountability and to take appropriate steps for prosecuting those responsible. It encouraged greater involvement of women in decision-making as well as participation in the politics at all the levels.\(^4\)

There are various provisions for women under the Indian Constitution. In the preamble of the Indian Constitution, in the Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and in the Directives Principles, the provisions of gender equality are enshrined in the Constitution of India.

In Part III of the Indian Constitution which guarantees the Fundamental Rights of men and women. **Article 14 guarantees the right to equality.** This Article says that there shall be no discrimination by law or in their administration. **Article 15 states that there shall be no discrimination on the ground of religion, race, sex or place of birth.** It is a guarantee against every form of discrimination to all the citizens of India. According to Article 15 part 3, there shall be nothing which shall prevent the country from making any special provisions for the benefit and upliftment of women and children. **Article 16 confers the right of equality of opportunity in the matters of public employment.** No citizen shall, on grounds of religion, race, sex, decent, place of birth, residence or any of them, be eligible for, or discriminated against in respect of any employment or office under the State.

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Article 21 protects life and personal liberty. Article 23 guarantees right against exploitation and trafficking in human beings.

Part IV of the Constitution deals with the Directives Principles of State Policy and the Directive Principles which are of the concern for the women directly and bear upon their status are: Article 39(a)—Right to an adequate means of livelihood equally for men and women. Article 39(d)—Equal pay for equal work for both men and women.\(^5\)

The Constitution (73rd Amendment Act 1992) included the reservation of seats for women in Panchayats. This amendment was made in order to improve the position of women especially at the village level and thus, providing an opportunity to women in the political field. In addition, Part IX- A has been added to the Constitution by the 74th Amendment Act, 1992. It provides for the setting up of 3 types of Municipal Corporations. Of the total seats (including the seats reserved for women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) to be filled by direct election in every Municipality, not less than 33% shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted to them by rotation to different constituencies in a Municipality.

The Indian Parliament has also enacted variety of statutes dealing with the problems of women in the light of various international and regional agreements. A number of the important legislations are enacted for safeguarding the interests of women before as well as after independence.

The Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of our Constitution have made extensive safeguards in favor of women. According to Granville Austin, “Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles are the conscience of our Constitution.”

OBSTACLES AND BARRIERS FOR NON-PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS IN INDIA

The Constitution of India gives universal adult franchise to both men and women with equal rights to participate in electoral competition, but the existing societal value system, the private-public divide in terms of domain identification in political institutions restrict women from exercising their electoral rights and a fair participation in electoral competition as it is dominated by men.
These factors also act as key barriers and obstacles in women's active participation in the Indian electoral system and in the larger issue of women's advancement as a whole.

One of the main barriers to participation of women in politics in this country is illiteracy. India has one of the largest illiterate populations. Illiteracy limits the ability of the women to understand the political system and issues. Due to illiteracy, many women are sometimes left of the voters list and, as a result, they are not able to exercise their political right. Women who are into active politics and are not educated are not able to handle the office efficiently as the women who are educated have access to all sources of communication like memos and newspaper which helps them to be updated with all the latest news which helps them to make wise political decision.

Poverty is another barrier which has led to low political participation of women in India. Often poor people have no direct voting stance. It is often influenced by rich and well-off people. Just before elections the poor people are given resources such as blankets, television, food, alcohol by various political party workers so that these people vote in favour of them. There are various political parties who work for the poor people and there are some political groups and parties who only work for these groups. These political parties don’t win easily as they are low in their funds if compared to other political parties who get their funding from rich business tycoons. Rich business tycoons invest in the parties from which they will get adequate returns. But from these poor people, they shall get no returns as they do not pay that much tax which the other citizens of the country pay who are better off than these poor people.

The institution of marriage is another barrier which leads to less political participation of women in India. After a woman gets married, all her political decisions are controlled by the family she is married into if she comes from an uneducated family. Even if she comes from an educated family, to an extent she is influenced by the family she is married to and often there is a clash in ideology. After getting married, the woman has hardly any time to contest elections or go for campaigns as she has new responsibility added to her shoulders. She needs to look after her family, she needs to look after the kids, needs to do all the household work, even go to work.

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6 NIROJ SINHA, WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS, 180-252, EDITION 01;2000
CONCLUSION AND SOLUTIONS

Any meaningful assessment of the political participation of women should begin with asking whether lack of sufficient representation is responsible for their low status or is it their poor status that is responsible for the exclusion of women from certain levels of political power.

“Education is the most powerful tool that can be used to change the world.” This is one of the major solutions to so many problems faced by India. The more we educate, higher the number of people who are aware of their rights. As we start eliminating illiteracy, we also change the way people think and this makes them more rational towards problems faced by various sections of society. Injustice is something that shouldn’t be tolerated and by education, we empower people to stand up for themselves, refrain from harming others and at the same time make remedies more accessible. It also instills in citizens a sense of being protected as they will realize that there is recourse in law for them.

Educating the masses is definitely not a piece of cake and on the other hand, it’s a hard task to make people evolve in terms of their mindset. Even though our current society does have people who are highly educated, we still find them backward/narrow minded in the way they think. Education isn’t the only tool that should be absolutely relied upon to solve this problem. The government has been providing free education and mid-day meals but how many families are actually willing to send their kids to school? It also comes down to the aspect of poverty where sending the child to work would be a source of additional income. It is a tradeoff between earning extra money for survival and education and most people under these circumstances would choose money that is necessary for survival.

We need to remove the Constitutional provisions and policies guaranteeing a place of honor and equality to women because they are not enough to combat the menace of inequality. For the emancipation of women and ensuring them equality, the educational, economic and political independence of the women is of paramount importance. This can lead to total development of the women. This goal of economic independence and empowerment of the women can be achieved only through gainful employment opportunities. Women’s gainful employment especially in more rewarding occupations clearly will play a role in improving the lot of the women especially in increasing their status and standing in the society. The economic empowerment automatically
follows political empowerment so it is quite clear that the socioeconomic condition of women will improve only if they are also a part of the governing process is a fact that is widely accepted the world over. Therefore, it becomes important and necessary for the women’s organizations as well as the Government of India to search for remedies to improve the political status of the women.
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