



“POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA”

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Abstract: *Political participation is a process by which people take part in political activities. Exercising voting rights during elections is one of the important political activities of the people. Participation of women in this political activity is almost equal to men. The struggle for freedom marked the beginning of a political awakening among women in India. The Constitution not only grants equality of treatment to women but also calls upon the state to adopt measures favoring women neutralizing the socio-economic, educational and political disadvantages that they face. The present paper critically analyses political participation of women in India.*

Key words: *Women, politics, empowerment of women, gender equality.*

1. Introduction:

There are four important debates in the narrative on the question of political Participation of women both at the global level as well as in India: one debate tries to look at the Women's participation as part of “empowering women” particularly as political categories.¹ Second debate tries to argue that voting rights or suffrage will remain as symbolism or “Political tokenism”² rather than actualizing participation in traditional societies such as India, Iran etc and the third debate looks at suffrage as essential component for creating Egalitarian society and final debate argue that political participation especially through “quota” or reservation not necessarily leads to social emancipation of women, as women are still without property rights and that gender bias still operates at the large level.³ In fact women's participation has given rise to different

discourses or perspectives too. One of the perspectives is known as Increment list Perspective.⁴ It believes that gender equality is a phased phenomenon. According to this discourse gender equality develops gradually, step wise and as a concerted effort where state intervention may assist in moving equality in the high direction. Although this particular discourse has been contested by large number of women's movement on the ground that such a trend would definitely go against the spirit of achieving gender equality in short span- it might take hundreds of years to achieve gender equality in politics. In fact in India Increment list Discourse is dominating the political discourse. Incidentally in India one question is quite often asked: can Indian politics become, as has been the case of Nordic countries, “laboratory of gender equality”? given the fact that gender bias still prevails, property rights are

still a mirage for large number of women and that political participation is largely a “deterministic” to the interest of gender. Interestingly women’s participation has a long history in India, dating back to the pre-colonial Period.

Political participation is a process by which people take part in political activities. Exercising voting rights during elections is one of the important political activities of the people. Participation of women in this political activity is almost equal to men. Political participation is not just casting vote. It includes wide range of other activities- like membership of political party, electoral campaigning, attending party meetings, demonstrations, communication with leaders, holding party positions, contesting elections, membership in representative bodies, influencing decision making and other related activities. With this understanding of political participation, the evidence shows that in most of the countries participation of women is not impressive as the number of women participating in active politics is smaller compared to men. Women who are able to acquire decision making power are mostly from urban and elite groups. Large mass of women are kept out of political arena due to various reasons. There was no serious attempt to accommodate women in politics. In many countries women had to wage long battles to get their rights. Despite that, they were not able to get rightful position in the arena of politics. The most common and accepted political action in elections is voting. This is exercised by women equal to men and in fact the number of women voters is increasing day by day. But women until the 20th century did not have the right to vote. This is position of our Women’s in politics.

2. Status of Women in Ancient Indian Society:

Every human society is invariably characterized by social differentiations. Amongst such differentiations, gender based differentiation is one. This has been relatively more specific in earlier societies. Accordingly men and women were treated differently. They were assigned different roles and status. Men had the role of bread earning and

protection of women and children. Women had the role of reproduction of heirs and home- making. Historical records show that the position of Indian women varied through the ages. A historical understanding of status of women in early Indian society shows a declining trend in the position of women. A.S. Altekar divides the society into various groups. In the Rig Veda, (2500 BC to 1500 BC), the position of women was fairly satisfactory. The girls were educated equal to that of boys and had to pass through the period of Brahmacharya. The marriages of girls used to take place at an advanced age of 16-17 years. In the eyes of religion, women were equal to men. Both boys and girls were allowed to undergo ‘upanayana’ [sacred thread] ceremony which initiated them to education. Women had considerable freedom in the different activities of the social and political life.

In the history of Indian society, the age of Jainism and Buddhism are considered as little progressive to previous times. Women enjoyed a bit of freedom and certain opportunity, particularly in spiritual matters. During this time, female education was encouraged. It was possible that women could become missionaries and even they could remain unmarried. However, in the ‘Jataka’ books of Buddhists, women were criticized as evils, thieves, unreliable and wild. According to Buddhism, woman can reach the highest stage, she is, however inferior to men.⁵ Various writings in history shows that during the Muslim period from 11th century onwards, position of women further deteriorated. The pardha system was rigorously enforced.

Freedom of women was restricted. Early marriage, enforced widowhood, deprivation of education was all in full form. Uma Chakravathy argues that the traditional work on the status of women in India existed entirely within the context of Hinduism and is pre-occupied with religious and legal questions. The social position of women in public assemblies and their right to education is neglected. Traditional writers were concerned with the status of women within the family and primarily

in the relationship of wives to husbands. Secondly, the position of women is based entirely on the Brahmanical sources that reflect the precepts of Brahmanas rather than the cultural practices of the people.⁶

Feminist scholars argue that this history is the product of 19th century interaction between colonialism and nationalism. Even from Brahmanical sources alone, there is sufficient evidence to show that the structure of institutions that ensured the subordination of women was complete long before Muslims as a religious community had even come into being. Women had a certain limited recognition only as wives and mothers within the patriarchal kinship structure. The golden Vedic age of Indian womanhood was a selective picture of the past created in the contest of the politics of the 19th century.⁷ The historical analysis of the position of women in ancient India shows that women did not share an equal position with men. Women were recognized only as wives and mothers. Their position was as subordinate to men. The later movements like Buddhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism, Veerashaivism and Sikhism made certain efforts to improve the status of women. The Bakhti movement allowed women to undertake spiritual activities independently. It is the 18th century that is considered to be the darkest period in the status of women, where women were subjected to male superiority in all fields.

3. History of Political Participation of Women in India:

The root to the participation of women in politics can be traced back to 19th century reform movement. The early 19th century social reforms and educational programmes initiated by various social reformers dealt with the social evils prevalent in the society. The social reform movement has been regarded as a key to the intellectual processes that went into the making of modern India. They thought that social change could be initiated by educating women and bringing progressive legislation.

Social evils can be eradicated by raising consciousness and making people sensitive to injustice done to women. Social reformers like Rajaram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahadeva Govinda Ranade, Behramji Malabari raised their voices against the prevailing practices and social customs subjugating women. Their efforts rallied around issues affecting women's life adversely such as the practice of sati, female infanticide, plight of the widows, child marriage, polygamy etc. Rajaram Mohan Roy championed the ban on the practice of sati. The campaign resulted in the governmental resolution of 1829, banning the practice of sati. Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar took up the cause of widows and started a movement for widow remarriage in 1850's. It resulted in Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. But this act denied them the right to their husband's and family's property. It met with strong opposition from Bengali orthodoxy.⁸ Actually nothing much could be achieved through these legislations. Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar fought against polygamy and encouraged women's education. Pandith Ramabai, Manorama Majumdar, Sarala Devi Goshal started Bharath Shree Mahamandal for the education of women. Swarna Kumari Devi started women's organization called Sakthi Samiti in 1886 for widows. Behranje Malabari started campaign against child marriage and nationwide debate over Age of Consent Bill. It met with strong opposition from the orthodox Hindus. The attack was spearheaded by Lokmanya Tilak, who defied the legislation as an attack on religion. The orthodox Hindus were connecting the issue of reform and religion. They wanted all reforms within the framework of Hinduism. So the movement was almost totally overwhelmed by Hindu revivalism by the end of the 19th century.

The new revivalism was embodied in powerful organizations such as Dayanand Sararwati's Arya Samaj (1875), Vivekananda's Ramkrishna Mission (1897) and Annie Besant's Madras Hindu Association (1904). The new organizations attacked the reformers but supported some reforms of the

Hindu society. They did not incorporate a good deal of the programmes of reformers such as educating women, raising the age of marriage, remarriage of child widows etc, but all this was to be done within the framework of Hinduism. Nivedita Menon observes that movements, as well as the resistances to such reforms were decisively shaped by the colonial encounter. Prominent sections of the bourgeoisie had an intend to reform what the colonial discourse presented as primitive and barbaric aspects of the Hindu society, while the resistance came from revivalist nationalists who challenged the colonial interventions into the Indian tradition. Vina Mazumdar observes that 19th century social reform movement was as keen to imbibe western progressive and democratic values as it was to re-establish the past glory of Indian society.

The urge to change and yet to root this change in one's indigenous culture was natural to a society that has experienced the trauma of colonialism.⁹ The movement was not seriously concerned with the question of gender equality. Reforms were restricted by the value system and did not take up the cause of women emancipation seriously. The movement brought in some minor changes and no drastic change in the position of women was brought in. But it is considered as the movement that laid the foundation for women's movements that followed later.

4. Women in India's Freedom Struggle:

The struggle for freedom marked the beginning of a political awakening among women in India. With the establishment of the Indian National Congress, membership was open to women.

The national movement brought women to the centre stage. From liberal homes and conservative families, urban centers and rural districts, women single and married, young and old came forward and joined against colonial rule. Their involvement is extremely important, women's participation called into question the British right to rule, legitimized the Indian National Movement and won for activist women, at for a time the approval of

Indian men.¹⁰ Large number of women participated actively in the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, Swadeshi, And Salt Sathyagraha led by Gandhi. During the Non-Cooperation Movement, women in different parts of India joined processions and propagated the use of khadi (spun cotton) and charakha (spinning wheel). Vijayalaxmi Pandit, Renuka Ray, Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi and Kasthurba Gandhi played an important role in the boycott of foreign goods. In the Barsad Satyagraha of 1922-24, women turned out in large numbers. In Bardoli Sathyagraha of 1928, women graduall you numbered men in political gatherings. Maniben Patel and Bakti Desai fixed their tents on the land declared to be sold by the government.

In the Salt Sathyagraha launched by Gandhi in March 1930, many women walked to Dandi to break the salt law. Sarojini Naidu, Muthuben Patel, Mridula Sarabai, Khurseedben, Kamaladevi Chattopadyaya and Avanthikabai, Gokhale were some of the prominent women associated with the Salt Sathyagraha. During the Civil Disobedience movement of 1940, women participated and courted arrest in large numbers. Suchetha Krapalani was the first one to do so, who had been in charge of the Women's Department of the All India Congress Committee, since 1939. In the Quit India Movement of 1942, women took part in processions holding meetings, demonstrations and organizing strikes. Kanakalatha Barua, a young girl of Assam led a procession of 500 and was killed in the police firing. In Bombay (Mumbai), Usha Mehta operated an underground radio station. Aruna Asaf Ali was one of the most important figures of 1942 movement, for years she remained underground avoiding arrest. She published bulletins and edited the news letter 'The Inquilab' along with Ram Manohar Lohia. Few women who did not believe in non-violence adopted the revolutionary path. Young college girls joined secret societies. Kalpana Joshi, Preeti Waddadar were associated with Chittagong armoury raid.

In the 1937 election, eight women were elected from the general constituencies and 42 from

the reserved constituencies, and became ministers when the provisional cabinet was formed. Vijayalaxmi Pandith become minister for local self government in Uttar Pradesh and later Ansuyabai Kale and J.T Sipahimalchi were appointed Deputy Speakers in Madhya Pradesh and Sindh, respectively. Hansa Mehta and Begum Shah Nawoy took office as Parliamentary Secretary in Bombay and Panjab respectively. In the Constituent Assembly which met in December 1946, there were 14 women members.¹¹ But there were no proportionate increase in women as representatives or in power positions. For example, in 1922 the All India Congress Committee (AICC) meetings, out of 350 delegates, only 16 were women, in 1937, 13 and in 1940, 5 members were women. In the Constituent Assembly, only 14 members were women. It has been noted that the women who were active in politics or politically successful belonged to wealthy and progressive families. They were supported by husbands or family members who were active in Congress.

This is being followed even after independence. But, there were large number of unknown women who participated in the freedom struggle. It provided an opportunity for large number of women to enter into active politics which was not seen earlier. They were willing to join processions, and to go to prisons. Women joined revolutionary groups, helped in distributing newspapers and helped in the manufacturing bombs. Innumerable number of women provided support to freedom fighters by looking after their families. Vina Mazumdar says there are references in the reports during that period that thousands of women attended the political meetings. Very little is known of who they were, why they came, and from where they came?¹² Geraldin Forbes notes that the participation of women legitimized Indian National Congress. Women's activities validated Indian unity and sathyagraha. Most important, it legitimized their claim to a place in the governance of India. It also shaped movement for women's rights. At the same time participation of women had some clear drawbacks.

Those demonstrating, claimed to represent all India women, but the number of groups involved, other than upper and middle class Hindu women, was never large. Participation of large number of women in the freedom struggle strengthened freedom movement. But gender equity was no where the agenda of Indian national movement. It was not the main thrust of the Indian national movement. Either directly or indirectly large number of women participated in the freedom struggle. The contribution of women in getting freedom for India is noteworthy. They proved that women are capable of strengthening the political movement. The participation of women in freedom struggle had its impact on the society and family and on women themselves

5. Constitutional Provisions:

The Constitution not only grants equality of treatment to women but also calls upon the state to adopt measures favoring women neutralizing the socio-economic, educational and political disadvantages that they face. The following are the various provisions in the constitution which ensures equality between men and women. Article 14 guarantees equality before law and equal protection of law with in the territory of India. This Article stands for absence of any discrimination by law or in their administration. Art 15 prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth. It is a guarantee against every form of discrimination. According to article 15(3), nothing shall prevent the state from making special provisions for the benefit women and children. Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity for all citizens in matter relating to employment or appointment to any office under state. Secondly no citizen shall, on grounds of religion, race, cast, 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. Article 39- a) guarantees right to an adequate means of livelihood for all citizen. Article 39 b) guarantees equal pay for equal work for both men and women. c) that the

health and strength of workers, men and women, and the tender age of children are not abused and that citizen are not forced by economic necessity to enter occupations unsuited for their age or strength. Article 42 guarantees just and humane condition of work and maternity relief.

This is in accordance with Article 23 and 25 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 51-A clause (e) says that it shall be the duty of every citizen of India- to promote harmony and sprit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India, transcending religious, linguistic and religious or sectional diversities, to renounces practice derogatory to the dignity of women.¹³ The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has added the following articles to the Constitution providing reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Article 243-(D) (2) states not less than 1/3 of the seats reserved under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to S. C or as the case may be S.T. Article 243-(D) (3)-extends political reservation to women not less than 1/3 of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats shall be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a panchayat. Article 243-(D) (4) extends reservation to elected offices as well. The office of the chairpersons in the panchayats or any other level shall be reserved S.C and the S.Ts and women in such a manner as legislature of a state may, by law provide. The legal Constitutional framework in India would appear a combination of Communitarian perspective on one hand and that of liberal democracy on the other hand.

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Representation of women in parliament and state assemblies remain at a very low level. Their representation is 10.8% in parliament. No doubt a few seats have been given to women but it has not been in proportion to women's strength in population.

6. Conclusion:

One of the key challenges faced by women is lack of education which hinders their political involvement. We recommend bridging this gap by providing quality education to women in the country. Awareness about their rights and privileges as mentioned in the Constitution can only be ensured once women are appropriately educated. The issue of gender-based violence and provision of safety and security of women should also be addressed on a priority basis to promote gender equality in the social and political arenas. Although the Government of India has initiated the National Mission of Empowerment of Women in 2014 with the broad objective of gender empowerment, the progress of this study is not up to the mark. It is thus imperative to strengthen its functioning and implementation. there is need for capacity building of prospective women leaders by imparting leadership training to the female members of political parties. To secure women's rightful place in society and to enable them to decide their own destiny and for the growth of genuine and sustainable democracy, women's participation in politics is essential. This will not only uplift their personality but will open the way for their social and economic empowerment. Their participation in public life will solve many problems of society.

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