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Trends and dimensions of political participation in India: An analysis since 1989 general elections

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Abstract

The political participation of different categories has increased in recent elections in India as compared to the elections held after independence. The term political participation is often used to describe an action taken by a citizen to influence the outcome of a political issue. No definition is universally accepted, but political participation can be defined as those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government decision-making. In India voting is the primary means of political participation. A unique and special political act, voting allows for the views of more people to be represented than any other activity. In the general elections held since 1989 to the present elections of 2019, different sections of society like the male, female and youth has actively participated. Effective political participation is an indicator of true democracy. The higher the participation of people, the healthier the democracy. The voting percentage of male as compared to female and youth is always high. But now the trends are changing, women and youth are also participating in politics due to the influence of social media and different awareness policies of government. There has been a visible change in the level of political participation since 1989 general elections. This study aims to focus on some of these trends.

Keywords: Political participation, elections, democracy, voting, trends

1. Introduction

Indian politics like global politics has witnessed dramatic changes during past three decades or so. In this process of change some new trends are emerging in Indian politics and some dormant trends are being apprehended. Perhaps this has generated an important and vehement debate by the academicians in recent times. Since the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the space of development has accelerated the new trends like democratic aspirations and political dimensions exclusively relating to the functioning of Indian political processes (Rai, 2011).

In Social Sciences, political participation simply means that a person is participating in political process by making his or her opinions and beliefs known. The term political participation is often used to describe an action taken by a citizen to influence the outcome based on a political issue. No definition is universally accepted, but political participation can be defined as those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government decision-making (Parasuraman, 2009).

2. Review of literature

Political Participation has been the subject of extensive research in the past few decades. The exact definition of political participation is still subject to much debate. Its features include those actions undertaken by ordinary citizens that are intended directly or indirectly to influence the selection of governmental personnel or policy decision making. A substantial part of the research on political participation focuses on voting which is considered the most common and important act of participation. According to Huntington and Nelson (1976) "By political participation we mean activity by private citizens designed to influence government decision-making".

Participation in electoral process involves much more than just voting. Political participation derives from the freedom to speak out, assemble and associate; the activity to take part in the conduct of public affairs; and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government. The term political participation has a very wider meaning.

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It is not only related to “Right to Vote”, but simultaneously relates to participation in decision making process, political activism, political consciousness etc. It is an action that influences the distribution of social goods and values. People can work in an election campaign, contact public officials, circulate a petition, join a political organization and donate money to the candidates. Serving on a local governing or school board volunteering in a community and running for office are forms of participation that requires significant time and energy. Organizing a demonstration, protesting and even rioting are other forms of participation (Thanikodi and Sugirtha, 2007).

Political participation is normally associated with the modern forms of democracy. In this political system, participation by the individual in political activity is considered a virtue, a sign of political health and the best method of ensuring one’s private interests. Participation gives an opportunity to express one’s own point of view and secure the greatest good for the greatest number. It provides citizen a sense of dignity and value alerts both the rulers and the ruled to their duties and responsibilities and facilitates broader political understanding. By involving people in the affairs of the state, participation promotes stability and order in the system. It not only stimulates political learning but also makes citizens responsible. It deepens the political awareness and increases the sense of political effectiveness (Koushik, 1993). Thus, political participation is multidimensional.

3. Objectives

The two main objectives of the paper are

1. Firstly, to understand the dimensions of political participation in India.
2. Secondly, the paper would also delineate the emerging trends of political participation in case of male, female and youth in India since 1989 General Elections.

4. Data sources and methodology

The study is descriptive and analytical in nature. Data needed for the analysis is taken from the website of Election Commission of India. The study is mainly based upon collection of secondary sources such as magazines, books, journals, research articles and records of Government of India.

5. Need of political participation

People get involved in politics for a variety of reasons. They may be personally motivated because of an event that changed their lives. They may receive invitations to participate from friends, organizations, political parties, or a candidate’s campaign. A person’s socialization, life experience and attitudes toward politics can influence participation. Some people have a strong sense of civic duty and a belief that they can influence government, which compels them to act. Barriers, such as legal obstacles, may prevent some people from engaging politically. Most people do not wake up one morning and decide that they are going to engage in politics. They must be motivated to participate, often by people or organizations reaching out to them and asking them to get involved. Nowadays, people receive digital invitations to participate through Facebook groups formed by friends, e-mail solicitations from campaigns, interest groups, and from political organizations. Political participation is necessary mainly for selecting a

good leader for a country who can work for the development of the country and welfare of the people. Nowadays people are participating in a large number in political process than before. People are taking interest in politics in a large number; they are giving keen interest in casting their votes. Political participation is important for the development of state and society. Social media is playing an important role through which people are becoming conscious about politics and political participation.

Many citizens do not participate in the decision-making process of the government. They do not vote or participate in the other ways which we have discussed before. However, some people believe that citizens have a responsibility to participate. We should be sure the people we ‘hire’ (elect) can do the job we are hiring them for. Once they get the job, we should keep an eye on them to make sure they are doing that job. If they do a good job, we may not watch them as closely. If they do a bad job, we may watch them very closely and may even decide to replace them. Participation in government is in our own self-interest. The amount of time we spend participating will probably depend on how well we think our elected officials are doing.

5.1 Importance of 1989 General Elections

There has been a visible change in the level of political participation since 1989 general elections. This paper aims to focus on some of these trends. This paper mainly focuses on the male, female and youth’s political participation since the 1989 general elections. General elections were held in India in 1989 to elect the members of the 9th Lok Sabha. The result was a loss for the Indian National Congress and Rajiv Gandhi, because all the opposition parties formed together a minority government under V.P Singh and the National Front. This election saw the rise of era of coalition and mushrooming of the regional parties. V.P Singh won a ferocious internal party battle and defeated Devi Lal and Chandrasekhar for the top post. Eight national parties and around 105 state parties participated in the polls. Janata Dal won majority of its seats in Uttar Pradesh (54) and Bihar (32). BJP won majority of its seats in Madhya Pradesh (27). Congress lost badly in UP, MP, Rajasthan and Bihar (179 seats out of total decline of 217 seats) (Kumar, 2013).

5.2 Political participation since 1989 general elections

In the general elections held between 1989 to 2019, different sections of society like the male, female and youth has actively participated. From the beginning we can observe the male participation is higher compared to other sections. It is said that male section dominated the whole political system from the very beginning. The voting percentage of male as compared to female and youth is always high. But now the trends are changing women and youths are also participating in politics due to the influence of social media and different awareness policies of government.

Since the independence it is observed that the participation of women in politics is limited and is lower as compared to men. Women are universally regarded as a weaker sex as much politically as they are biologically, socially and economically. The association of Indian women with politics goes back to the pre-independence days, when they participated in the various phases of the freedom struggle as

volunteers, leaders and commanders and suffered like men. Such participation could be made possible due to the contributions of the social and religious reformers in the field of women's education, emancipation and upliftment (Roy, 1999).

Women's participation increased manifold as the National Movement acquired a mass character under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Women have held the posts of President and Prime Minister in India, as well as Chief Ministers of various states. Indian voters have elected women to numerous state legislative assemblies and national parliament for many decades. Women in India participate in voting, run public offices and political parties at lower level more than men. Political activism and voting are the strongest areas of women's political participation. To combat gender equality in politics, the Indian government has instituted reservation of seats in local government. Women turnout during India's 2014 parliamentary general elections was 65.63% compared to 67.09% turnout for men. India ranks 20th from the bottom in terms of representation of women in parliament (Damle, 1989).

The level of political awareness of Indian youth is much higher than among the adults and in the coming years they will be the biggest contributing factor to the political change in the country. The youth constitutes of almost 34% of the Indian population, and is India's precious human resource. Today, youth has the power to transform our nation. The

responsibility of transformation, progress and innovation lies on their young shoulders. It is high time that the youth participate actively to bring about change in the country. In the coming time, it will be the youth section of society that are and will be targeted by political parties as a vote bank (Baru, 2014). Table 1 shows political participation of male, female and youth since 1989 General Elections.

6. The analysis

From the Table 1, it is marked that the male, female and youth voter's turnout was high during the 1989 general election. The cause of increase in the percentage of voter's turnout may be due to the coming up of the V.P Singh government. The 1989 election saw the rise of an era of coalition politics and post to that, all government in India have been the same. Janata Dal was formed in 1988 merging Jana Morcha. It became popular throughout India as a party to fight corruption. The overall voter's turnout was 61.95% in 1989 general elections. Though V.P Singh campaigned and came into power, his government has not done any impressive work and his government came to an end in the year 1991. The reasons behind the downfall of V.P Singh government are the implementation of Mandal Committee Report¹, not taking any actions against Bofors scandal², worse economy, abnormal price rise etc. As an impact of this, the voter's turnout decreased (i.e. male-61.58%, female-51.35% and youth-54.2%).

Table 1: Political Participation (in Terms of Voting percentage) of Male, Female and Youth since 1989 General Elections

| Year | Male (in terms of percentage) | Female (in terms of percentage) | Youth (in terms of percentage) |
|------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1989 | 66.13 | 57.32 | 59.8 |
| 1991 | 61.58 | 51.35 | 54.2 |
| 1996 | 62.06 | 53.41 | 56.0 |
| 1998 | 65.72 | 57.88 | 63.0 |
| 1999 | 63.97 | 55.64 | 61.0 |
| 2004 | 61.66 | 53.30 | 56.0 |
| 2009 | 60.24 | 55.82 | 59.0 |
| 2014 | 67.09 | 65.30 | 66.4 |
| 2019 | 67.11 | 66.71 | 66.06 |

Source: Election Commission of India, retrieved on 12th February, 2021)

The period between 1989 and 1991 was highly turbulent in India. Communal and caste politics emerged in large scale during this period. No party in India, including Congress, BJP, Left or Janata Party descendants could claim to be truly secular. In order to strengthen their vote base, they indulged in either communal or caste politics, under the disguise of secularism. Further during the middle of general elections 1991, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated. This incident also further worsened the economy of the nation. With so much of confusion around, Narasimha Rao, a senior leader, who was ignored and side-lined by Congress took over as Prime Minister in 1991 and managed the crisis silently and successfully for five years (Srinivasan, 2013).

The next elections were held back to back in the year 1996, 1998 and 1999 respectively. During this period, there was instability in the government. That is why there was frequent rise and fall in the voting percentage of male (62.06%), female (53.41%) and youth (56%) in 1996 general elections. In 1998 general elections the voting percentage of male was (65.72%), female (57.88%) and youth (63%). The reason behind this may be the public was unable to take decision to vote for whom due to instability in the government. But, there was increase in voter's turnout

in the 1998 general elections. General elections held in India in 1998, after the collapse of the government elected in 1996 and the 12th Lok Sabha was convened. Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee was designated as the Prime Minister. The withdrawal of AIADMK support greatly influenced the general elections. The government lasted only for 13 months due to unclear mandate and also the party was unable to get support from other parties.

The government became stable from 1999 elections onwards. The voting percentage of male female and youth also got stabilised. Afterwards, in the 2004 and 2009 general elections the voting percentage was not so impressive. In 2004, male voting percentage was 61.66%, women percentage was 53.30% and youth percentage was 56%. Again in 2009 general elections, male percentage dropped to 60.24% but female percentage increased to 55.82% and youth percentage to 59%. The overall voter turnout declined. The main reason for the decrease in the voter's turnout percentage is India maybe because people of India had been hit by scandals surfacing one after another through 2011, such as, the 2G scam³, Commonwealth Games scam⁴, the 'Cash for Votes' and the Karnataka mining affair. Anna Hazare's anti-corruption mission had jeopardized the

vestigial faith of people in Congress. Above all, Congress declined from a monopoly to a surviving party in India (Goyal, 2011).

There was record breaking voting percentage in the 2014 (i.e. male-67.09%, female-65.30% and youth-66.6%). The 2014 Lok Sabha election saw several previous records being shattered, participation of voters being prominent among them. We can see that in 2019 general elections the female participation is 66.71%, male is 67.11% and youth is 66.06%. An estimated voter turnout of 67.11% of male was recorded across the country during the Lok Sabha Elections 2019, which is the highest ever voter turnout in the history of general elections in India. This election was recorded a narrow gap of 0.4% between male and female voters. It is the highest ever, as well as the highest ever participation by women voters. Female participation has been increasing since 1962. But 2019 marked the first time female voter turnout equalled male voter turnout with a gap of 0.4%. In this general election female voters even overtook male voters in a few States and Union Territories. Young voters also played a key role in 2019 general elections, one of the deciding factors in the 2019 general elections (Kumar and Sardesai, 2014; Jensen, 2015).

India is a youth or young country. 45 million young people, having become eligible to vote as they turned 18, have been added to India's electoral roll since 2014. This has expanded the voter list by 5% since 2014. How India's young population votes became one of the deciding factors in the 2019 general elections, when 24 million new voters joined the country's electorate. The 2014 elections witnessed much higher participation among first time voters (18-22 years). But even a marginal shift in the votes of first time voters in favour of the BJP was enough to help the party register an impressive victory. This is because first time voters were in large numbers in most constituencies.

Table 1 depicts the narrowing gap between men and women in the voting percentage. The 2019 general elections have brought the gender gap to the historic low. Women have successfully broken the barrier of gender marginalisation at least in exercising their voting rights. Increased women's voting percentage over different elections does indicate the growing enthusiasm and participation of women in the elections. Nevertheless, participation is limited to barely voting only and it is difficult to find women in substantial number in Lok Sabha. From the above Table 1, it is found that the voting percentage of female and youth has increased as compared to male voters per year. We can also find the female voting percentage is always less than that of the male voting percentage since 1989 general elections. However, in recent elections held in 2019, we find there has been noticeable increase in the percentage of female voters as well as there has been also a drastic leap in the voting percentage among the youth.

7. Suggestions

The paper aims to bring out the following suggestions

- a. **Make it easier to vote:** As Indians move from place to place for employment/studies, they get disenfranchised simply because their names appears in their place of origin and no one is seriously going to travel to distant place to cast their vote. Information and technology could be used for facilitating this.
- b. **Campaigns for voter awareness:** It is the need of the hour that the society, media and political parties to play

active role in improving voter awareness.

- c. **Political parties to put good candidates:** There should be a provision for political parties to put up fresh candidates and call for a re-election. That would force political parties to think about which candidates they put up.

8. Conclusion

Political participation, in simple words, means a person participating in political process by making his/her opinions and beliefs. In social sciences, the term political participation is often used to describe an action taken by a citizen to influence the outcome of political issue. The electoral politics is an important dimension of the nature of political participation. The election provides a necessary feedback to the government. The study and analysis of the voting behaviour of the people are of immense help to know the political culture of the area or the constituency. Therefore, keeping this in view, the paper has highlighted some of the emerging trends of political participation in terms of voter turnout in case of male, female and youth in India since 1989 general elections. The trends may become more remarkable if different other sections of the society were taken into account and if a comparative perspective is brought out taking into consideration the statistics of the general elections before 1989, when India was still to enter the phase of multi-party system and coalition politics.

To conclude, keeping in view the heterogeneous character of India, it is very difficult to find out a stable trend of political participation among different sections and these trends will continue to be changing from time to time in the future keeping in view the influence of multiplicity of factors that has a significant impact on electoral politics of India.

9. End Notes

1. The Mandal Commission or the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission (SEBC) was established in India on 1979 by the Janata Party Government under P.M Morarji Desai with a mandate to identify the socially or educationally backward classes of India (Maheswari,1991).
2. Bofors Scandal was a major weapons contract political scandal that occurred between India and Sweden during the 1980s and 1990s initiated by Indian National Congress politicians and implicating the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, and several other members of the Indian and Swedish Governments.
3. 2G Scam was said to be the biggest scam in the history of Independent India. The 2G Spectrum case was an alleged scam that the politicians and private officials under the United Progressive Alliance Coalition Government in India were accused of committing. It was claimed that the magnitude of the scam was 2,867,800,000,000 rupee (Sengupta and Munshi, 2017).
4. Commonwealth Game Scam in the year 2010 in New Delhi is one of the major Indian scams, whose main accused being Suresh Kalmadi, the chairman of the organizing committee of Commonwealth Game. The Commonwealth Game scam involves a pilferage of about nearly Rs 70,000crores (Mishra, 2010).

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