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Muslim and electoral politics in India: An appraisal of Muslim women

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Abstract

In India the movement for women's suffrage began in the early 1900s in response to a national movement for suffrage. Shortly after Indian independence from Britain, the Indian Constitution in 1950 officially granted women and men suffrage. It is in this context the article analyzes the electoral participation of Indian Muslim Women and their role in Indian politics. The share of Muslims in the Indian Parliament has declined in the past two decades or so and in this backdrop the article examines the factors responsible for the decline of representation of Muslim women in India. The paper also studies the problems and difficulties associated with the poor representation and involvement of Muslim women in Indian politics. In conclusion the paper highlights some important recommendations which can bring the Indian Muslim women in mainstream politics.

Keywords: Muslim, women, elections, minorities, India and politics

Introduction

In any political system, whether the developed or the developing countries, presence of women is very low as compared to men. In all most all countries women had to wage long battles to get the right to vote. Today the percentage of women as voters has increased considerably, but their political participation is not equal to men and therefore women are unable to get an equal share in organization that require decision making. Women have not been regarded as significant part of the political arena. Politics at every level of participation is dominated by men. Women who consist of almost half of the population need to be represented significantly in decision making bodies. Otherwise the goal of development cannot be achieved. Gender equity is very essential for the progress of any society. The very idea of democracy will fail in its objectives if women citizens lack equal chance to take part in governmental decision-making practice. They are to be equal partners in the nation-building and political development. Milbrath and Goel observed that it is a tradition in almost all societies that politics is mainly an affair of men and that women should fall in line with them politically. The changes brought by modern industrial societies are eroding this gender difference but the impact of tradition is still visible. Men tend to be more psychologically involved in politics than women ^[1]. No doubt the representation of women has increased in decision-making by both customs and laws, yet women are denied full social approval. However, Zenab Bano believes that participation of those women in politics is only due to the kinship ties as they have the male members who are involved in politics she argues that "these women are not representing the lower income families or downtrodden ones" ^[2]. Unless women have real access to the political participation and representation they will not be able to develop fully in the society. The manhood and patriarchy in the society limit the role of women in politics. So, politics, according to Bano, is masculine in nature. 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 look at the women's participation as part of "empowering women" particularly as political categories ^[3]. Second debate tries to argue that voting rights or suffrage will remain as symbolism or "political tokenism" ^[4]. The third debate looks at suffrage as essential component for creating egalitarian society and final debate argues 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 ^[5]. In fact women's participation has given rise to different discourses or perspectives too.

One of the perspectives is known as Incrementalism Perspective ^[6]. 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.

Political involvement is a process by which common people take part in political actions. Exercising voting privileges during polls is one of the vital political activities of the people. Involvement of women in this governmental activity is virtually equal to men. Political involvement is not just casting vote in elections. It includes wide variety of other activities-like affiliation of political-party, electoral activism, attending party meetings, protests, communication with leaders, holding party spots, contesting elections, affiliation in representative bodies, influencing decision making and other important related acts. The term Political participation has been defined by different scholars in various ways. It means not only exercising the right to vote in elections, but also power distribution, co-decision making, co-policy making at all stages of governance of the state ^[7]. The data available with different government and non-governmental organizations display that in most of the nation's participation of women is not notable as the number of women participating in politics is smaller camp. Women who are able to obtain power of decision-making are mostly from elite and urban families. Large numbers of women are kept out of political process due to numerous reasons. There was hardly any serious attempt to accommodate women in political arenas. In most of the countries women had to wage extensive battles to get their due rights. Despite that, women were not able to get equitable place in the political process. The most important political action in the state is elections and voting. This right is enjoyed by women equal to men and in fact the sum of women voters is growing day by day. But until the 20th century, women in developed or third world countries did not have the voting right. First it was the American women who started fighting for their rights and especially for the right to vote. In western 'liberal' republics and democracies, women won the voting rights only after their organized fight with the system.

History of political participation of women in India

The origin of the involvement of women in Indian politics can be sketched back to social reform movement of 18th and 19th century. These social reforms and educational programmes which were started by various social reformers dealt with the social evils which were prevalent in the Indian society. These social reform movements have been viewed as an important key to the intellectual processes that went into the building of modern India. The struggle for independence marked the opening of a political awakening among women in India. The formation of INC (Indian National Congress in 1885) opened participation to women. The Swadeshi Movement in 1905 saw the entry of women into independence movement. It also marked the creation of numerous women's groups. The entry of Annie Besant into Indian politics in 1914 enhanced the course of women's association with the freedom struggle. She was the first woman to be designated as president of the Indian National Congress. The national movement for independence elated women to the Centre stage. From liberal families and conservative people, urban centers and rural regions, women single, and married, young and old, came forward and

joined the struggle against the foreign rule. Their participation is very vital, women's participation called into question the British right to rule, legitimized the Indian National Movement and won for activist women, for a time the approval of Indian men ^[8]. The condition in India is same as in many other nations of the world where women are underrepresented. A better thoughtful of this situation needs a historical investigation of status of women in India. Historical archives show that the place of Indian women varied through the ages.

Women in post independent period in India

The base of political involvement of women in politics was laid down during the national movement. The handover of power from British to Indian political leadership gave women opportunity to participate in democratic process of the country. Infact large numbers of legal, social and economic actions have been taken up by the autonomous governments to raise the status of women in India. However, Women too have become politically conscious, as they have started participating in national and as well as in state politics. After Independence in 1947, India became a republic. The Constitution not only grants equality of treatment to women but also calls upon the state to adopt possible procedures supporting women counterbalancing the socio-economic, educational and political difficulties that they face. The following are the various provisions in the constitution which safeguards 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 of the Indian Constitution which prohibits the discrimination on basis of, race religion, caste, sex, and birth place. It is a guarantee against every form of discrimination. According to article 15(3) of Constitution, nothing shall prevent government from creating distinct (special) provisions aimed at benefit of and children and women.
- Articles 39, 42, 44 under part IV, Article 5 1-A(c) under part IV A and Article 246 under part XI are noteworthy ^[9].

Most countries in the world have failed to give due space and representation to women in their political systems, only in a handful of countries women are moving equally with men, for example, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. In these countries women are making substantial access into decision making process. In the advanced countries like Western Europe and North America, female presence in legislature remains small and relatively insignificant. Comparatively the neighboring countries of India such as China and Pakistan are in much better position with 21.3 percent and 22.5 percent respectively. Representation of Indian women in parliamentary affairs is far from satisfactory. India 10.7 (Report of the Intra-Parliamentary Union to the UN Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women (UNCEDW) in Feb. 2010 ^[10]). In the fourth world conference on women that was held in China (Beijing) in the year 1995, the issue of women (gender) political empowerment (autonomy) came to forefront at the global level for women rights. A detailed set of recommendations

were issued to all governmental and nongovernmental organizations to enhance women's political participation and decision making power. Similarly, "*Women's Political Participation'-21st Century Challenges*" was also theme for a meet organized by UNDP in New Delhi from March 24-26, 1999. The meet engaged women politicians and representatives of civil society from all regions, in a dialogue to promote the sharing of experience and building alliances. It concluded that until gender parity is reached in governance, women cannot reach full equality with men in any sphere^[11]. India is in no way an exception to the rest of the countries with respect to the women representation. Corresponding to this various initiatives were taken in India. 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 kept under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to S. C or 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 election in every panchayat shall be kept for women. Such seats shall be assigned by rotation to diverse constituencies in a panchayat.
- Article 243-(D) (4) extends reservation to elected offices as well. The office of chairpersons in panchayats or for that matter any other level shall be reserved S.C, S.Ts and women in such a way as assembly of a state may, by law offer.

Recognizing role of a women in Indian democracy, Raj Bala says, "As parliamentarians, they (women) have played important roles in the growth and development of parliamentary institutions in India^[12]". Representation of women in parliament and state assemblies remain at a very low level. Their representation is 10.8 percent 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. Similarly, political parties (irrespective of political ideology) deny tickets to women candidates. They presume that women are not capable in comparison to men of winning elections.

Causes for low women representation in India

There are many factors and issues that are responsible for sorry state of affairs of low and marginalized representation of women in India. The antiquity of freedom movement in India shows us that a good section of women (cutting across the religious lines) participated in the independence movement. Nevertheless, in post-independence era it went on decreasing with each passing decade. In fact the Nehru-Gandhi ideology has completely vanished. With the passage of time gender roles have become key hindrances in women's political development. The traditional divisions of labour in Indian society, illiteracy, financial obstacles, not needed electoral process, absence of adequate training etc. have kept women far away from representation politics across the India. Likewise, elections in India have become too costly concern that had adverse effect on representation of women, as they are not in a position to make large sum of money that are requisite to contest elections.

Centralization of power and corruption has become main obstacles for women to participate in political affairs. The fact of the matter is that political parties in India are

reluctant to field women candidates. The gender biases of political parties are the major hurdles for women gaining decision making power. Women find it difficult to establish strong foothold in politics without party base. Only those women who are backed by their family or husbands are recognized by the political parties. Veteran women politicians are sidelined. No serious efforts are made to mobilize women as a political group. Male party leaders have shown little interest and willingness to include women in party decision making organizations or help to create a favorable environment for women's participation in their own groups. Therefore distinct procedures are mandatory; otherwise Indian democracy will continue to be extremely flawed if it fails to give satisfactory space to women^[13]. When major decisions are made and policies formed every day in different parts of the world regarding important issues, it is a fact that women's views and opinions are always sidelined. Similarly, Manu Bhaskar explains the; biological factors as limiting participation of women in politics. She argues,

"The inferior status of women in political institutions also results from the underlying biologism (biologism means a prejudice based on sex which determined gender roles by biologically assigned characteristics) of male gendered politics for gender equality"^[14].

It has been stated that the personality traits and the socio economic and cultural environment is to a great extent responsible for marginal participation of women in politics. The socio-political culture that puts maximum premium on the males, the political environment of instability, criminalization and absence of political ideology influence the extent of political participation. Socio political environment determines the participation and involvement of women in politics^[15].

No political party is seriously committed to the issue of reservation for women. No party opposes reservation provided for women in local governments and they want it to be restricted at that level. A critical mass of women is a prerequisite for the effective political participation of women. In fact, the aim of participation of women in political process is to reinforce and strengthen democratic tradition. The fact of the matter is that the increase in number of women in legislature will definitely change the status of women in India, though this change will not come in overnight. It is foolish to think that it could solve all problems that are faced by womenfolk and bring equality immediately in society. Similarly, the fact is that all powerful women all the leaders in our politics have failed to do much for the women in India. 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, with the result that even now women do not enjoy pride of place in the power centers of legislation, administration and party leadership.

The voices of women fall on deaf ears. As Alida Brill has remarked that: "Without our own voices being heard inside the government arenas and halls of public policy and debate, we are without the right of accountability-a basic entitlement of those who are governed".

Muslim women and their representation in India

Interestingly Muslim participation particularly women in political affairs has a long history in India, dating back to

the pre-colonial period. Indian Muslim Ladies Conference, claiming to represent the sole interests of all Muslim women was established in Lahore in 1907. The session in Lahore in 1917 attracted 400 Muslim women participants from across the country. *The Anjuman-e Khwateen-Deccan* (women's association) was formed in 1919. Indian Muslim women who ruled this region of the globe during the medieval times notably Razia Sultan, Chand Bibi, Begum Hazrat Mahal, etc. In modern times, it was only after 1920s that the Muslim women-related issues emerged and many organizations were formed in this regard. At the meetings, resolutions were regularly passed in favour of women's education, and against polygamy and the veil. Though, the leadership of the women's movement was restricted to women from elite families ^[16]. With the re-emergence of the Muslim League during the 1930s, the All India Muslim Ladies Conference faded away. In 1932, the League passed a resolution in favour of women's suffrage, representation and social equality. This was, as a scholar notes, "not a sea-change in its attitudes towards women", but more in keeping with the League's political priorities (and appeal for the 'women's vote'). It established women's branches all over the country and its success in the 1946 elections was partly due to Muslim women who voted for the party ^[17]. In the 1946 elections, Begum Shahnawaz and Begum Shaista Ikramullah were elected to the Central Constituent Assembly ^[18]. In post 1947 period the politics of India underwent radical changes. Only few Muslim women, like Mrs. Mohsina Qidwai of INC and Anwara Timur of Assam, were able to make entry into the mainstream politics'.

The fact of the matter is that there should be fundamental structural changes in reservation of seats for womenfolk. The Sachar committee report and post-Babri Masjid era has reshaped the Muslim political discourse in India. The share of Muslims in the Indian Parliament has declined in the past two decades or so. There are various reasons such as lack of leadership, corruption, political bigwigs, that is, VIPs and communal atmosphere that emerged during 1990s. The Muslim leaders in politics remained fragmented and unfocused despite few Muslim leaders like Dr. Zakir Hussain, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad, and APJ Abdul Kalam playing an important role in reshaping the Muslim political discourse in India. However, Muslims still remained marginalized when it comes to the question of representation. To Quote Zenab Bano, "for a Muslim it is easier to become president than panchayat member" ^[19]. The demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992 by cadres of the Bajrang Dal, BJP, Shiv Sena and VHP provoked widespread violence against Muslims.

Communal prejudice against Muslims-though not a uniformly pervasive phenomenon throughout India-is a cause for concern. It can project onto state policy as in 1977, when Mr. Jagmohan, in his capacity as Lt Governor of Delhi, asked for a 'dispersal of Muslim populations to prevent future "Pakistan's" in India' and ordered the demolition of Muslim settlements in part of the old city of Delhi. In 1989, George Fernandes, a cabinet minister, asserted that: "the Muslim is not wanted in the armed forces because he [sic] is always suspect-whether we want to admit it or not, most Indians consider Muslims a fifth column for Pakistan" ^[20].

Muslims are thought and be as major impediments to national integration, casting thinly veiled aspersions on Muslim cultural identity. Furthermore, Muslim women

faced the additional disadvantage of being women within a minority community. Legislation on women in post-independence India faced stiff opposition from Hindu and Muslim conservatives. On the completion of seven decades of independence, women in Muslim communities still face considerable challenges, both as citizens and as members of India's largest minority (i.e. Muslims). The underprivileged socio-economic status of women reflects a lack of social opportunity. In fact Muslim women are among the poorest, educationally marginalized, economically weak, politically ostracized group in India. Most Muslim women remain 'invisible' workers in the informal economy. The Muslim share in public employment is less than 3 per cent.

Similarly, the lack of social opportunities for Muslim women is a vital subject that needs serious and urgent act. The fact is a progress in knowledge (education) rate would directly impact Muslim women's socio-economic and political status. The formation of forums and associations of Muslim men and women's initiatives in the 1990s is an important step towards facilitating public debate on Muslim women's issues. Muslim women and men must collaborate with individuals and organizations that are committed to the realization of women's human rights.

Women are considered merely as political subjects rather than citizens with full rights and duties. At the same time Zenab Bano believes women have not used their votes as an effective means for achieving equality and justice for themselves. Women constitute roughly ten percent of the membership of political parties and they are hardly visible in decision-making. To quote Bano, "women in India are neither opinion maker nor the decision maker; generally they are accepted as the voters only" ^[21]. There are various reasons for this poor participation of Muslim women, like strong cultural norms, communal mobilization during elections, crisis of Muslim political leadership, and an almost conventional neglect of Muslim women candidature. Muslims have failed to understand what the political empowerment means. In fact "there is neither a single voice among Muslims, nor a charismatic leader nor a single platform where all the Muslim communities can express themselves. The bitter truth is that every Muslim has his own voice, his own discretion and accordingly he or she supports any political party, leaders programmed and caste votes"

Some important recommendations

- Strengthening and consolidating human rights apparatuses.
- Reforming and reorganizing constitutional provisions according to need of the hour.
- Self-empowerment and seriousness from government to their issues.
- Improving the economic status of Muslims in general and women in particular.
- Improving the educational status of Muslims on priority basis.
- Removing and eliminating social prejudice against Muslims, particularly hate, by others.
- Sensitizing and reforming the police and paramilitary forces towards human rights of Minorities.

Conclusion

To live in India is a new challenge for Muslims; they have

to preserve their identity and culture. There is a need for strong and vibrant women's organizations and civil societies, hunt for clean and fair nature of politicking, strengthening citizenship rights of Muslim women, eradication of poverty as poverty puts all plans down, and the like. Women should learn about the politics, they should not only be used as voters but as agents of social change. It would not be wrong to say that the pace at which Indian Muslim particularly Muslim women are moving, Muslim women would not be able to bridge the gap in politics in coming decades. Thurgood Marshall, one of the famous social scientist had quite aptly said, "*where you see wrong or inequality or injustice, speak out, because this is your country. This is your democracy. Make it. Protect it. Pass it on.*" It seems Marshall is quite relevant when it comes the Muslim political discourse in India. Furthermore, it is crucial for Muslims-women and men-to debate among themselves the possible reasons and remedies for their poor status as citizens of India.

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