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Feminist politics in India: Women, identity and political activism

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Abstract

The equality of men and women in the matter of right has been established by a large number of the Constitutions, codes and laws. The real question is to what extent the legal declaration about the equality of the sexes has been effective in real life. It is globally acknowledged that 'gender equality and women's empowerment' is at the core of achieving development objectives, fundamental for the realisation of human rights, and key to effective and sustainable development outcomes. The bitter truth is that in India, which still requires schemes like 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' against the most horrific societal discriminations like female foeticide, women are treated as 'second class citizens' and denied their rights; hence their political status has remained relatively low. No doubt, various constitutional amendments, Acts are able to create a political space for women but they are not capable to guarantee a non-discriminatory environment for women to participate. Constitutional provisions do not mean automatic enjoyment of the rights conferred therein. This study stresses that women are still *second-class citizens* in spite of the equal rights conferred on them and seeks to identify the challenges of women in political leadership positions in India, the largest democratic nation. Findings from the study reveal that there is considerable progress in women's equality in the leadership role; however, there are certain crucial obstacles that still exist for women to be active in the political realm.

Keywords: Feminism, women, gender equality, political participation

Introduction

Feminism comprises a number of social, cultural and political movements, theories and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women. It may be understood as theory-systems of concepts, propositions and analysis that describe and explain women's situations and experiences and support recommendations about how to improve them. Such theory is distinguished from non-feminist thinking about women or gender by its general respect for women's own perspectives and authority, and its persistent attention to the workings of power structures which privilege men. So, it is a politics to change the existing power relations between women and men in the society. The present work is an attempt to examine the Feminist politics in India and its effect on gender identity and political activism of women in India. Feminism in present-day India has been showing some encouraging trends. First, increasing economic liberty is allowing women to fight stereotyping. Second, what women want is changing – from economic rights to social and sexual rights. Despite their "proven abilities as leaders and agents of change", from the local to the global level, women's leadership and political participation is restricted. Several international committees have been made globally for achieving gender equality and these have emphasized on enhancing women's representation in political sphere. Women's political participation is regarded as an essential element in all forms of development; however, in India the gender equality policies remain under scrutiny. It has always been an issue concerning modern-day political experts. Traditionally, they played second fiddle to their male counterparts for no faults of theirs. After independence in 1947, there have been many initiatives to increase the political representation of women by the decentralization of power in various local self-government institutions of India. "Gender inequality is not one homogenous phenomenon, but a collection of disparate and inter-linked problems ^[1]." In India, political participation of women is quite low as compared to men because several cultural and societal barriers hinder women's political participation and decision-making. There is a lot of violence, discrimination, illiteracy and unawareness in the society. Problems like sexual abuse, torture, child marriage and domestic violence have lowered their political opportunities.

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Socio-Political apprehension of women in India

Political participation is a necessary ingredient of every political system. Although the political process in some societies is monopolized by only a few incumbents of political authority, every system, if found to be quite keen, is ensuring some amount of political participation by the people, by involving many in the matters of the system, political participation fosters stability and order through the reinforcement of the legitimacy of political authority. A society, in which a substantial part of the population is denied any right to participation whatsoever, is likely to be highly explosive. The idea of this participation naturally assumes importance in a democratic system, which, indeed, demands it. After all, participation is the principal means by which consent is granted or withdrawn in democracy and rules are made accountable to the ruled. The citizens must, at least, participate in the choice of their public officials in order to keep public action responsive to the wishes and desires of the people. Participation in politics and in public debate helps to build a better and nobler character in the people. People would be better human beings if they so participated. Thus, the role of political participation has been emphasized not only as a means to understand the nature of the political system and to control the functioning of the system, but also as a means to build up the character of the people^[2]. It gives some sort of satisfaction to the citizen-satisfaction with the Government and satisfaction with one's own role^[3]. Participation benefits the participants as well as the larger community. It enables men by giving them a sense of their own dignity and value, alerts both rulers and the ruled to their duties and responsibilities, and broadens political understanding.

Participation helps the individual to be effective and it associates him or her with the political system. The higher the rate and levels, the more varied the forms of participation, the healthier is the democratic system. Particularly in a society where certain groups are traditionally behind the others, they can be categorized as 'weaker sections' or 'disadvantaged groups'. Wider participation and mobilization at higher and higher levels would be necessary for their upliftment and that, in turn, would be healthier for the democratic system^[4]. Political participation is a complex phenomenon liable to be influenced by different variables. It denotes a series of activities, which have a bearing on the political process. To be specific, these activities mainly are (1) voting at the polls, (2) supporting possible pressure groups by being a member of them, (3) personally communicating directly with legislators, (4) participating in political party activity and thus acquiring a claim on legislators, (5) engaging in habitual dissemination of political opinion through face-to-face communication with other citizens. However, it is to be noted that more people discuss politics than vote, and many more vote than join parties or work in campaigns. Some empirical studies show that most people are just not especially politically oriented and political participation is not a "natural" concomitant of citizenship. Only small percentages, probably fewer than 10 percent in all democratic countries, belong to a political class^[5]: The various forms of political involvement fall into hierarchy or continuum according to the cost in time and effort that each demands. But other variables, such as political articulations, saliency, and interest, which can only partially be reckoned into the 'costs' -also affect the frequency of the various

forms of participation. Women's roles are such in which political passivity is perceived as the norm. Men heavily dominate women in political systems. Today women are connected directly or indirectly to the operation of society at every level, and at the same time occupy the aggregate position of outsiders. A study of their experience could offer an incomparable window on the internal dynamics of social history. In developed as well as in developing economy today, it is perfectly obvious that the part played by women in various spheres of life is constantly on the increase. But it is no less obvious that women still remain subjects of inequality and oppression. This has a harmful effect both on their status and on the social climate of the society in which they live. Few people would deny today the fact that the degree of women's emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation. There is a conviction that women are oppressed and discriminated and an explicit purpose of feminism is to promote the interests of women. The aim is not to substitute women from men but to give the rightful place to women as a sex in society.

Over the past two decades, gender gaps have narrowed in various areas, viz., education, health, employment, legal rights of women, participation in governance, and so on. But, despite the improvement, substantial inequalities, with varying degrees, still persist across all the areas across countries. However, India is far behind in achieving gender equality, especially in terms of representation of women in political decision making, among others, despite the fact that India is a signatory to all the international commitments. Representation of women in executive government and parliament is extremely low in India, both in absolute numbers as well as globally. Only a miniscule progress is observed in the entire post-independence era.

Between the First Lok Sabha (1952) and the seventeenth Lok Sabha (2019) women's representation has increased from 4.4 per cent to 14.39 per cent. Similar trend of low representation of women is also observed in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) during the entire period of post-independence era. Women's representation in Rajya Sabha has increased from 6.9 per cent in 1952 to 11.4 per cent in 2014. Again, these figures are substantially lower compared to the global average of 22.9 per cent and Asian average of 16.3 per cent of women representatives in Upper House. Considering the share of women (49.5%) in the total population of India, their representation in Parliament represents a lopsided statistic, which does not suit the world's largest democracy.

Women representation in Parliament shows us the mirror on how far India lags behind in providing its females the level playing field to be part of the political decision-making process. At present in the Rajya Sabha, there are 31 women members out of a total of 244 members, which is just 12.7 per cent of the Upper House. Further, in the Lok Sabha, there are only 66 women MPs out of 543, which comprise a sheer 12.2 per cent of the strength. The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India, passed in 1993, have taken women in the government's decision-making procedure by reserving one-third of the seats for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), but still today women are not empowered to take independent decisions. Further, even after 22 years of its launch in 1996, the 'Women's Reservation Bill, which reserves 33 per cent seats in the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies for women is still pending deliberately^[6].

Out of 47 Asian countries, India holds the 31st position. Among 8 SAARC countries, India's position is 5th and India holds the 4th rank among 5 BRICS countries. A relatively poor performance is evident, if India (11.9 per cent) is compared to the best performer Rwanda (61.3 per cent) in terms of women's representation in the parliament. As per the situation on January 1, 2017, it was observed that in 12 countries (out of 193) women's representation in parliament was 40 per cent or more. Rwanda tops the list with 61.3 per cent women representation in the parliament [7].

Thus, it is apparent that despite our constitutional commitment and several global commitments, India's performance in political empowerment of women is miserable. However, since the early 1990's, the 73rd and 74th amendments, which entail 33 per cent reservation for women in rural and urban local bodies, facilitated the entry of lakhs of women in the political arena. During the next two decades, there has been a dramatic change in women's representation in local administration. It is also a positive sign to note that many states, namely, Bihar, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Jharkhand, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan and Tripura further raised the women's reservation level to 50 per cent. Resultantly, it has brought more than 1 million women as elected representatives, including many from socially disadvantaged groups and even illiterate, into the political decision making process. Similarly, in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2017, the country is ranked low at the 108th position out of 144 in terms of overall representation across economy, education, health and politics [8].

In fact, the term 'political participation' is not only interrelated to 'right to vote', but simultaneously relates to participation in the decision-making process, political activism, political consciousness, etc. Women in India, starting from the home to the top layer of policy-making are continuously barred from decision-making at every step of the ladder. Women in India extensively took part in the Indian independence movement in the early twentieth century but after independence, historically women's political participation has remained minuscule [9].

Political participation is necessary not only as a means to understand the nature of the political system or to control the functioning of system, but also as a means to build up the character of the people because political participation has some role to play in nation building but women participation in politics do not present a very rosy picture because they are heavily dominated by men in political systems [10]. Although today's women have learnt to come out from the four wall and gave their contributions to the operation of society at every level but they still remain subjects inequality and oppression. The equality of men and women in the matter of rights has been granted by the Constitutions but discrimination against women was deeply rooted in the structure of society. So, independence was an essential precondition of the emancipation of women and a new life was brought to the movement for the emancipation of women. Vast masses of women participated in the freedom struggle after 1905 [11]. At that time women started to break their restricted lives and entered administrative, professional and political fields as equals of men. Women were elected to Parliament and State legislatures. They became cabinet ministers, Ambassadors and judges.

Different institutions of education, law, technology were open to them and they got chance to enter new occupations in the modern sector. But it was observed that the right to political equality could not help or enabled women to play their role as partners and constituents in the political process. Although the number of women's participation in politics increased, but their ability to produce an impact on the political process was negligible. So the erosion of productive roles makes women's position as only entities and also makes their lives cheap. Though, all the laws made various schemes to emancipate women they continued to be second-class citizens and according to the Marxists the lower degree of participant by women in politics was due to the nature of modern capital economy. Women have been socially taught to subordinate themselves, but it is the fact that they constitute half of the society, women belong to all sections and for that it not possible to secure freedom without bringing women into the political areas. Education is an essential thing to emancipate women because an educated woman is developed and enabled to give proper response to the political issues.

Therefore, it is imperative that the government takes legislative and constitutional reforms to ensure women's fair access to political spheres, especially in the Lok Sabha (Lower House) and Rajya Sabha (Upper House). There is an urgent need to bring back to the table the Women's Reservation Bill guaranteeing 33 per cent reservation to women. An intense parliamentary discussion is necessary to bring the issue to the fore and greater political commitment is the prerequisite for achieving the objective of political empowerment of women.

Problems of Gender discrimination

Gender discrimination is another form of domination of women in our society. Though the world developed in the way of modern information technology the Indian society is far away to divide the power equally among women till today. In social, political, educational field, women are suppressed unanimously. The history of women is no linear, nor does it have a well-organized structure. Women's duties as good daughters, good wives and good mothers is well defined in the Indian patriarchal society.

It has been described there that due to gender discrimination women have to face problems in every walks of their life. Women constitute about fifty percent of world's total population but vast masses of women are victims of sexual abuse, deprivation and social injustice even they are deprived of proper education, healthcare and others. Women are not" treated equally with men; they are subjected to oppression, deprivation and discrimination. Especially the poorest women suffer from these kinds of injustice in the society, in the family and in the community. There is also violence against women in our society and in our country. Every six hours somewhere in India a young married women is either burnt alive or coerced to commit suicide. The effects of this violence can be devastating to a woman's reproductive health as well as to other aspects of her life. In the eyes of Constitution there is no discrimination between men and women, but discrimination against them has gone a long way. After 70 years of independence women still remain the secondary citizen of the country. Today's women are the companions of their male partners in every field and every sphere of life, yet our conservative social systems do not allow them independency. Gender inequality in revealed

by imbalance in sex ratio, female foeticide, and lower participation of women in the decision making process etc. In order to satisfy the biological needs men oppress women. In the village community women are not involved in decision-making process and in the Muslim community women are not allowed to participate in manual work outside the home. In this way gender discrimination affects women's economic autonomy. So some reforms are needed to improve the status of women in our society. Women should be educated, they should get the fair chance in everything so that they can prove themselves as equal to that of their male partners and especially gender justice should be developed as a way of life.

This study attempts to highlight the struggle of Indian women. Many of them face unequal relationships throughout their life, from family to polity; still the level of consciousness about these disparities varies according to their socio-economic background. Educated urban employed women are found to be more conscious about socio-economic inequalities. They have been the major beneficiaries of the development process. While illiterate poor rural women and slum dwellers have their own struggle against socio-economic deprivations, it seems that women from sub-urban groups have, by and large, been marginalized by the development process. After independence, successive governments have passed social legislation to control social evils, yet social customs and behaviour responsible for these evils have not changed significantly. Social legislation equipped the government to fight against female infanticide, child marriage, dowry harassment and widow burning; but they too have failed to change prevalent customs, superstitions and social taboos, and these practices, by and large, remain an integral part of Indian social behaviour^[12].

Status of women in society denotes her position with respect to others in terms of rights and obligations. Sometimes, it is argued that women in India enjoy a very high status. In this context, constitutionals and legal provisions are cited and distinguished women in public offices are mentioned. Educated urban employed women are also included in this category. On the other hand, it is maintained that a lot of Indian women are very strenuous; therefore arguments in favour of reservations for women are justified. Illiterate women from rural areas and urban slum dwellers can be identified in this category. Though in terms of gender justice, Indian women cannot be treated as a homogeneous, region, caste, class and ethnic groups still largely they face in equal power relations throughout their life at different levels. Common experience of discriminatory behavior binds them with common thread. Educated employed women are more conscious of in equal distribution of resources from family to polity^[13]. So they are more active in their quest of gender justice while their illiterate counterparts continue to suffer without such consciousness, universal suffrage and political participation have played limited role to improve socio-cultural status of marginalized women in absence of education and economic autonomy^[14]. Discrimination against women is found in every culture and society in varying degrees. It is manifested in various domains of life and activity: economic, social, political and religious. As a result of gender discrimination, the status of women is subordinate to men and they have little access to education, food, nutrition, health care employment and wages.

The general oppression and subordinate position of women in human society over time and space constitutes an important perspective of human development. It has now been realized by the modern States all over the globe that comprehensive human development is not possible until the position of women in the family and society is improved. Specific development policies and programmes are thus being formed from time to time to improve physical, intellectual, economic, social and legal conditions of women. It is assumed that given certain special facilities in the spheres of economy, education, health care and legality women might gain the essential power in the domestic domain and, to actively participate in the public domain of human development^[15]. The difference between man and woman is conceptualized in terms of 'gender' that broadly refers to the cultural construction of the sexual difference between male and female in human society, and empowerment is a means to improve the positions of women by providing them material, intellectual and socio-political rights equal with men in the society and State. Women's empowerment is one of the aspects in the whole process of human development. It involves continuous provisioning of rights and privileges to the women by the State, and improving their life-situation to fight gender inequality.

Conclusion

Equal political participation for women at par with men is a fundamental condition for a truly accountable and vibrant democracy. However, recent results in the Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat Assembly elections show that gender disparity leading to deprivation of power among women continue to be a political reality in India. The Constitution of India, which regards the 'right to equality' above other Fundamental Rights has been dishonoured by the dismal political representation of India's largest minority-women. Similarly, in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2017, the country is ranked low at the 108th position out of 144 in terms of overall representation across economy, education, health and politics.

In fact, the term 'political participation' is not only interrelated to 'right to vote', but simultaneously relates to participation in the decision-making process, political activism, political consciousness, etc. Women in India, starting from the home to the top layer of policy-making, are continuously barred from decision-making at every step of the ladder. Women in India extensively took part in the Indian independence movement in the early twentieth century but after independence, historically women's political participation has remained minuscule^[16].

A better representation of women in parliament can make legislatures more gender and child sensitive can influence legislation and policies that address the rights of both groups. Case studies confirm a strong commitment by women legislators to issues related to children, women and families. For example, a pioneering study women legislators in Latin America found that in the 1993-1194 parliaments, women deputies in Argentina were 9.55 more likely to sponsor children and family bills than their male counterparts. Recent evidence suggests that this pattern hold true over the subsequent decade, with women legislators in Argentina playing a crucial role in ensuring the passage of a law that modified that country's penal code to explicitly define sexual crimes against women and children^[17].

However India should work towards empowering women economically through microfinance programs and encourage them to be panchayats or in village councils as women leaders. As India falls in the lowest quartile with respect to the number of women in parliament (9.1%). The UAE with 22.5%, has more women representatives according to the UN's 2008 survey of women in politics which said that 15th Lok Sabha elections have delivered a record having 59 women as members of parliament, most probably the highest since independence, and 17 of these women are under 40 and the representation of women leaders at the grassroots level. In India is nearly 50%, since the passing 73rd amendment in 1992 according to which one-third of all seats are allotted to women. Panchayati Raj (consists of three levels), that bedrock of rural government has fostered more and more women participants and leaders^[18]. Several states like Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Bihar and most recently Uttarakhand have allotted not just the required seats 33% of panchayat for women but also increased it to 50%. In Bihar it has seen that the spouses of women head of panchayats styling themselves as 'mukhiyapatis'. Rajasthan also announced 50% reservation before 2010 panchayat election. Naturally the rise of Indian women as panchayat leaders is a remarkable and spectacular achievement because India has one of the worst records with respect to the way it treats the female sex as suppressed, violated and discriminated against; basically Indian women have the odds stacked against them. At the end women empowerment along with joint responsibilities of both male and female section is not only essential for emancipation of women, but also for the progress of human culture and civilization.

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