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Political reservation and its impact on women's political participation in India: A review

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Abstract

After centuries of struggle, India achieved independence in 1947. The concept of India was founded on equality, democracy, and harmony. In the hope of making this country a model for unity in diversity, the founding fathers of the Constitution emphasized the secular, socialist, democratic, and republican system, as well as justice, freedom, and equality for all regardless of caste, sex, religion, or place of birth. As the largest democratic nation in the world, India strives to promote and include all of its residents in the country's social, economic, and political activities. For the inclusion of women in the political affairs of the country and to make them visible in the decision-making process, the government came up with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992. The present paper is an attempt to make a review of the existing literature about the problems and prospects of the reservation system for women. It is argued that though the reservation system has brought changes in the politics of India, but women's representation is still limited, and their decision-making power is also restricted. The study provides some suggestions and recommendations to the government and other stakeholders that will help in the removal of obstacles and barriers to women's political participation.

Keywords: Barrier, constitution, inclusion, participation, reservation

Introduction

The political participation of women is a matter of debate all around the world. In India, the inspiration was taken from the colonial legacy of local self-government and the vision of Mahatma Gandhi's self-sustaining 'village republics'. The need to raise a voice against the low political participation of women was felt soon after the independence of India when it framed the full-fledged Constitution. The Constitution not only grants protection but also equality in socio-economic and political matters (Agnes, 2008) ^[1]. Despite the constitutional provisions, the representation and participation of women is still negligible. The government of India came up with the constitutional amendment Act 1992, which provided one-third of seats to women with the intention to have inclusive participation and the promotion of decision-making power of women (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2003) ^[9].

Methodology

The present paper is based on the in-depth review of existing literature on the political reservation system at the grass root level and its impact on participation, gender equality, social justice, and the representation of women in India. This review of literature includes books, research papers, government reports, etc. The major focus of the review has been to analyze the impact of reservation on women's participation, gender equality, development works, and the decision-making power of women.

Review of literature

Political reservation and women's political participation

The reservation of seats for women at the panchayat level Institutions has shown great results as it has resulted in the participation and representation of women who had not been given a chance before the implementation of the Act. A study in its findings points to the gender quotas that were enforced as being an effective technique of eliminating inequities that have positively helped in contributing to the provision of disadvantaged women with a greater voice and more opportunities for their political empowerment (Priebe, 2017) ^[2].

It is found in the study that quotas reserved for any election that attempt to boost women's political influence by reserving a share of the seats contested in any election for them have gained a significant deal of appeal. Utilizing 15 years of nationwide data from India, it finds that gender quotas enhance the level and quality of women's political participation, their ability to hold leaders accountable, and their willingness to contribute to public goods (Deininger *et al.*, 2011) ^[4]. According to the findings of a study conducted in West Bengal, women pay greater attention to the public goods that worry them, such as clean drinking water and well-maintained roads, and less attention to the public goods that interest men. An examination reveals that women are given a higher social position as a result of reservation, and as a result, they attempt to run for office more frequently. It can be seen that the majority of the courtiers are embracing the reservation policy, and other new democracies are also forming, both of which add momentum to the engagement of women in politics (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004) ^[3]. In a study, it was found that reservation or the quota system has given potential benefits to the women candidates who want to join politics based on the quota system; using data from Bombay, the researcher finds that the probability of a woman obtaining office if the constituency was designated for women in the previous election is almost five times higher than if the constituency had not been allocated for women (Bhavnani, 2009) ^[6]. It argues that reservation gives impetus to women to contest elections on their own choice because of the win probability.

Political reservations and challenges

With the implementation of political reservation, political parties try to field female candidates in the reserved areas as proxy candidates only to fill the seats, and the real work is done by the male family members, thus hampering the political empowerment of women (Karekurve-Ramachandra & Lee, 2020) ^[11]. It is also argued that this quota system has given rise to further marginalization of women because only those women are fielded in the election that has a political background and are from economically well-off families. The quota system is used by the elite class and marginalized groups are excluded from the reservation system. It has also been found that people belonging to underprivileged categories are less likely to get elected because of their social status (Knispel, 2020) ^[12].

Political reservations about gender equality and economic growth

Political participation of women at panchayat raj institutions has led to the improvement of gender equality, but most of the time it has not happened because these women are chosen to the offices by their spouses, which becomes a symbol of tokenism. The research shows that there is no difference in performance between male and female leaders. Women perform better than men in several places where they have more political experience and where they live in areas that are less dominated by higher castes, according to the findings (Ban & Rao, 2008) ^[5]. This reservation system uplifted the downtrodden women in general and the Dalit women in particular. The women from marginalized sections did not get a chance to take part in politics, but with the implementation of the Act, these women were able to participate in politics and be a part of the decision-making process (Barki, 2016) ^[10]. Political participation through the

quota system pushes the economic growth of women upwards because women get engaged in unorganized sectors with the help of women in political positions. Using data from sixteen major Indian states between 1960 and 1992, a study determined that raising the proportion of seats designated for Scheduled Tribes greatly reduces poverty, but increasing the proportion of seats protected for Scheduled Castes has no effect on poverty. It shows that Political reservation for Scheduled Tribes has a bigger impact on rural poverty than urban poverty and that it appears to assist both those near and far below the poverty line.

Political reservation, corruption, and social justice

Political spaces in India have been occupied by males and the Indian political system is male-dominated. In this political system, women are not provided social justice and are discriminated against in social, economic, and political fields. Reasons for reservation have been put forth because it is anticipated that gender-balanced representation will affect the priorities, attitudes, and concerns regarding development in terms of social justice and participation in decision-making and provide opportunities for disadvantaged groups to rise from backwardness (Sharma, 2000) ^[7]. After the implementation of political reservation, there were more and more establishments in the unorganized sector, and women were seen investing more in infrastructural works. The exposure of women in politics improved the perception of men regarding women. It states that political empowerment leads to the improvement of economic prospects, which rise in tandem with the size of a person's political voice, facilitating the empowerment gains associated with these political reservations (Ghani, *et al.*, 2014) ^[8].

Conclusion

Reservation of seats for women at the grass root level has both positive and negative impacts on women. It has been a subject of great debate since its implementation. There are both arguments in favor and also against the quota system. This political reservation was brought into action with the pure intention of raising the political participation of the common masses living in rural India. Its main focus and target were the marginalized sections of the country, like women. The study finds that the reservation policy has gained potential results by promoting political participation and representation of women. It has given them the platform for expressing their views through their women representatives. The main challenge with this reservation system has been the proxy candidature which is done by the male family members of the women. It is also argued that it promotes dynasty politics since women from political backgrounds are fielded in the election on reserved seats. It is thus suggested that this reservation system should have checks and balances and it is implemented in a fair and transparent manner. The government should conduct awareness programs to highlight the importance of political reservation of women so that they are not influenced by politicians and male family members.

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