

Women as Strong Agents for Better Change with Special Reference to Their Political Participation in Rural India

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Abstract

An important area where women have been inadequately represented is in the political sphere. Articles 325 and 326 of the Constitution of India guarantee political equality, equal right to participation in political activities and right to vote respectively. The participation of women in politics and in other decision-making bodies after attaining independence is very limited. Given this situation, the State has to take some corrective actions to ensure that women participate equally in the political sphere. Women face numerous obstacles in achieving representation in governance. Their participation has been limited by the assumption that women's proper sphere is the "private" sphere. Whereas the "public" domain is one of political authority and contestation, the "private" realm is associated with the family and the home. By relegating women to the private sphere, their ability to enter the political arena is curtailed.

Keywords : Discrimination, Political participation, Decision-making, Empowerment

Introduction

The Constitution of India is based on the principles of equality and guarantees equality before law and equal protection to all its citizens. It not only guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms, but also prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, and place of birth. However, these rights have remained *de jure* and have not been translated into *de facto* rights. As such, women have been denied social, economic, civil and political rights in many spheres.

An important area where women have been inadequately represented is in the political sphere. Articles 325 and 326 of the Constitution of India guarantee political equality, equal right to participation in political activities and right to vote respectively. While the latter has been accessed, exercised and enjoyed by a large number of women, the former i.e., right to equal political participation is still a distant dream. Lack of space for participation in political bodies has not only resulted in their presence in meagre numbers in these decision making bodies but also in the neglect of their issues and experiences in policy making.

Rationale for the Study

The affirmative action adopted by the government of India providing for reservation of not less than one-third seats in local self governing bodies has facilitated more number of women to participate in the decision-making arena equally with men in these institutions. Further, these women are now in a position to access resources and utilise the powers vested in them as elected members. This is a significant step towards achieving the constitutional goal of equality. However, much more needs to be done to provide an enabling and conducive environment in the political institutions to enable women to participate effectively.

Today, the political environment is deeply entrenched in corruption and criminalisation. This situation needs to be changed as women have the potential to defuse and transform the mainstream political culture, by making it more transparent, accountable and participative.

This baseline report is an effort to identify the areas of discrimination with regard to women's political participation. The discrimination against women in relation to their rights as full citizens are not linear and are intersected with

biological and social differences of caste and class identities. Therefore, discrimination through the patriarchal institutions and feudal systems needs to be examined. Though the Indian State has taken several measures, the intention of the State to ensure equality has not been addressed in terms of Substantive Equality. Subsequently, satisfactory elimination of discriminative practices with regard to women's political participation has not been fulfilled. The baseline report, through a substantive definition of equality, has taken into account diversity, difference, disadvantage and discrimination and tries to specify those conditions which are needed to establish equal, effective and complete participation of women in political processes. It also examines the obligation of the State in ensuring and fulfilling this equality under the National and State Laws as well as in its International Commitments.

Objectives of the Study

- To identify the indicators and substantiate the existence of disparity and disadvantage women face in their political participation.
- To highlight the causes and barriers that limit women's political participation and its effect on women.
- To examine the obligation of the State to ensure and facilitate the participation of women in politics and the initiatives taken by the State in terms of legislative actions, policies and programs and their effectiveness.
- To identify the lacunae in the initiatives of the State and evolve strategies to enhance the involvement of women in all activities of political processes.
- To prioritise short and long term advocacy strategies and build coalitions and networks to monitor the State in fulfilling its obligation.

Focus of the Study

This study focuses on gathering evidence on whether PRIs are gender responsive institutions and the extent to which they are playing a role in addressing strategic gender interests at the local level. In keeping with the definition of GRG, the study attempts to specifically understand: (a) whether PRIs are spaces that encourage dialogue on gender issues; (b) whether strategic gender issues are recognised as priorities for PRIs as a whole; (c) the gender attitudes of its members; and (d) the personal and political gains for EWRs. This exploration also focuses on the enablers and challenges to the entry of women and men into the political arena as well as their functioning once elected.

Methodology

The definition of political participation encompasses a large arena comprising a wide range of activities, such as in trade unions, co-operatives, collectives, informal and formal political action. However, the scope of this study is limited to addressing women's participation only in electoral politics (formal politics) and women's constituencies at various levels from the grassroots to the State Legislatures and Parliament at the Centre. At the grassroots level of local self-governance, the study has attempted to provide an analysis based on a region-wise representation of various states in India.

Political participation for this study has been defined to mean and include participation of women in terms of their numbers (i.e. the presence or absence of a critical mass), the quality of their participation and their involvement in effective decision-making in political institutions and the electoral processes as candidates, elected representatives and constituencies.

Sources of Information

The information for this baseline report was

primarily collected from secondary sources and supplemented with primary information in certain areas. They range from statistics regarding women's political participation at all levels of governance to qualitative information that includes individual case studies, debates and critiques of women's political participation. While the information on the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is adequate, that for the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act and for the 85th Constitutional Amendment Bill, information is scarce and inadequate, thus limiting the scope for analysis at the levels of urban local bodies, the State Assemblies and the Parliament. At this point we would like to reiterate and emphasise the need for generating a database through micro studies and documentation to enable further analysis of issues. The material collated in relation to women's participation in politics has been analysed using the framework of substantive equality.

Historic Firsts: Women in Government

- Sukhbaataryn Yanjma, Mongolia (1953–1954): World's first female (acting) president
- Isabel Peron, Argentina (1974–1976): World's first female (non-acting) president
- Vigdis Finniloogadottir, Iceland (1980–1996): World's first female elected president and first female world leader who did not have a father or husband who was also leader at one time.
- Mary Mc Aleese, Ireland (1997–2011): First time that a female president directly succeeded another female president
- Sirimaro Bandaraaike, Shri Lanka (1994–2000): First time that a nation possessed a female prime minister and a female president (Chandrika Kumaratunga)

simultaneously. Sri Lanka in 1994 also marked the first time that a female prime minister directly succeeded another female prime minister.

- Johanna Siguroardottir Iceland (2009): World's first openly lesbian world leader, first female world leader to wed a same-sex partner while in office.
- Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan (1988-1990): The first female prime minister of any Muslim majority country, she was re-elected in 1993.

Some of the most prominent female leaders of world powers in recent decades were (listed by name, then position):

- Corazon Aquino, 11th President of The Philippines.
- Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, 14th President of the Philippines.
- Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India.
- Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.
- Tansu Çiller, Prime Minister of Turkey.
- Benazir Bhutto, Prime Minister of Pakistan.
- Golda Meir, Prime Minister of Israel.
- Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany.
- Kim Campbell, Prime Minister of Canada.
- Julia Gillard, Prime Minister of Australia.
- Edith Cresson, Prime Minister of France.
- Pratibha Patil, President of India.
- Soong Ching-ling (AKA Rosamond Soong), President of the People's Republic of China.
- Jiang Qing, Director of the Cultural Revolution.

Evolution of Women's Participation in Political Activities

Women's organisations in India first began to emerge in the early 1900s, and later in the 1970s after a period of limited activity from the 1950s to the 1970s. One of the earliest women's organisations, Bharat Stree Mahamandal, was formed in 1910 and it focused on helping women escape oppression from men. One of the most prominent women's organisations in India is the AIWC. It was established in 1927 and it focuses on empowering and educating Indian women.

Indian women are significantly involved at the grass roots level of activism. The Chipko movement that arose in the 1970s is an example of success among the women's movements in India, as women protested against the deforestation in Uttarkhand leading to the protection of the region.

The roots of women's participation in politics can be traced back to the nineteenth century reform movement. This movement emerged as a result of conflict among the Indian bourgeoisies, trying to wrest control from the British. This class made attempts to reform itself, mainly by campaigning against caste, polytheism, idolatry, animism, purdha, child marriage, sati etc., perceived as elements of primitive identity. Raja Ram Mohan Roy focused on two issues, namely women's education and abolition of sati. In the early 1850s, a campaign for widow remarriage was launched resulting in the passage of a Bill in 1856, which allowed widow remarriage. Though this Bill helped the situation of widows, it denied them the right to the husband's or his family's property. Several eminent women reformers participated in this movement as well as in the religious reform movement of this period. Pandit Ramabai,

Manorama Majumdar, Sarala Debi Goshal who started Bharata Stree Mahamandal for the education of women, Swarna Kumari Debi who started the women's organisation Sakhi Samiti in 1886 for widows are a few examples. These activities gave momentum to women's participation in public spaces, which paved the way for their entry into the independence struggle. Swarna Kumari Debi, one of the two delegates elected from Bengal to represent the State at the 1890 Congress session is a case in point.

Women's Participation in the Independence Movement

The Swadeshi movement in Bengal (1905-8) marked the beginning of women's participation in nationalist activities. Many of the women were from families involved in nationalist politics. Middle class nationalist women contributed jewelry, money and even grain to the movement. They took active part in the boycott of foreign goods and in revolutionary

activities. Sister Nivedita is reported to have become a member of the National Revolutionary Council and in that capacity organised women for nationalist activities. Like her there were several others seen as a threat by the British including Agyavati in Delhi and Madame Cama who was described by the Government as recognised leader of the revolutionary movement. There was also Kumudini Mitra who started a journal called 'Suprabath' which linked nationalist politics to women's traditional power. Madame Cama, a Parsi woman nationalist, persuaded the International Socialist Congress to support the Indian Independence Movement and also began a monthly journal called 'Vande Mataram' towards this end.

Beyond any doubt, the active participation of women in the political struggles for independence consummated in a Constitution based on the principles of equality guaranteeing equal rights to suffrage for women, in the year 1947 itself.

Women in Independent India



The participation of women in politics and in other decision-making bodies after attaining independence has been very limited. Given this situation, the State has to take some corrective actions to ensure that women participate equally in the political sphere. Also, it is imperative to adopt certain affirmative action to eliminate the existing discrimination to ensure political equality as guaranteed in the Constitution. The government of India, noting the low participation of women in politics; acknowledging the recommendations of the Committee for Status of Women Report, 1974; and drawing from the pioneering experience of Karnataka which provided reservation for women in its three tier Panchayat Raj system (institutions of local self-governance) in the year 1983 adopted an affirmative action for providing reservation for women in these institutions in the year 1993. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act introduced not less than 33 per cent reservation for women in the Panchayat Raj institutions in the rural areas. Similarly, the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act introduced similar reservation for women in Nagara Palikas and Municipalities in towns and urban areas. With these Constitutional Amendments, over three million women are now actively participating in shaping the policies and programmes of the country, though only at the local levels of governance. However, such affirmative action is lacking at the higher echelons of governance at the State and Central levels.

Challenges Faced by Women

Women face numerous obstacles in achieving representation in governance. Their participation has been limited by the assumption that women's proper sphere is the "private" sphere. Whereas the "public" domain

is one of political authority and contestation, the "private" realm is associated with the family and home. By relegating women to the private sphere, their ability to enter the political arena is curtailed.

Gender inequality within families, inequitable division of labor within households, and cultural attitudes about gender roles further subjugate women and serve to limit their representation in public life. Societies that are highly patriarchal often have local power structures that make it difficult for women to combat. Thus, their interests are often not represented.

Women's Movement and NGO Initiatives

The women's movement has been underlining the need for women's political empowerment. It has been adopting multi-pronged strategies : consultations, signature campaigns, large public meetings, media advocacy, lobbying political party functionaries, relay hunger strikes, protest sittings and marches and so on. On the other hand, there are several NGOs that have focused their attention on training women elected local levels of governance and also prospective women candidates. The purpose is to facilitate them to effectively function in the political office. There are researchers studying women's political participation, identifying factors that impede or promote women's active participation in electoral politics. There is a need for all these efforts to converge. What is also important is that the Movement and the NGO sector must bridge the existing gaps and unite as one major force to promote and facilitate women's political participation.

Women's participation in the political process is critical both to the strengthening of democratic traditions and to their struggle against

oppression. Political activism for women, as for other underprivileged groups, is integral to social transformation. The momentum therefore requires considerable strengthening and acceleration.

It is not sufficient that women are given political space at the local and lower levels of governance. The struggle for women's reservations at the higher levels of political office must continue. The enactment of the 85th Constitutional Amendment Bill is still a distant dream. The struggle for equality in economic, social and political spheres will continue until it is achieved. Only then can women charter their political agenda to build a gender just society.

Recommendations

The Government should:

- Create awareness amongst women and the candidates contesting in the elections through mass media about the electoral process and thereby eliminate powerful men taking advantage of the ignorance of women and controlling their decisions in exercising their right to vote.
- Organise regular programmes to gender sensitise the local, State and National level administrative personnel, the political party members and functionaries of the enforcement agencies.
- Work towards ensuring that all elected women are imparted training in a conducive and enabling environment with facilities that would enable women to attend all training courses, such as convenient timings, transport facility, child-care support and so on.

The NGOs should:

- Disseminate information on the functions and responsibilities of the elected

representatives and the role of women as politicians.

- Monitor the state in fulfilling its obligation of providing an enabling environment for women to participate in politics.
- Facilitate horizontal and vertical interaction of women elected at the different levels of governance to enable sharing of experiences and building solidarity and networking

The Political Parties should:

- Ensure that their election manifesto promise of reserving 33 per cent seats for women in state assemblies and the Parliament be fulfilled.

Conclusion

There is an old adage, when you educate a man, you educate an individual; when you educate a woman, you educate the whole family. However, reservation is an easy shortcut to ensure the participation of women in politics. Reservation at the bottom is needed to bring about social change, but is it really needed at the top level. It is important to stress that like the equal right to vote, participation and representation in legislative bodies may not in itself be enough for women's empowerment. Equality with equity is a goal which may not easily be achieved only by the high representation of women in legislatures and other public bodies but has to be buttressed by other supportive measures. Electoral participation and reservation through affirmative action alone are not enough to result in gender equity.

Women's fight for justice or their cry for gender equality is not a fight against men. It is a fight against those traditions which have chained women, by laying down men and women. It is men who must accept the fact that women are

equal partners in life having an equal identity. Future society will not progress without making the best use of its women. Not doing so is like running a race with only one leg or thinking with only half a brain. The situation of women in Indian politics will not improve till we have made significant changes in the mindset and ideology of Indian people.

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