



## Empowerment of women through political participation in India

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### Abstract

Political participation is the hallmark of a democratic setup. Effectiveness of democracy depends on the extent to which equal and effective participation is provided to all its citizens. Women comprise about half of the population in India, this requires proper attention and due share in the political process. Citizens' active participation in political affairs strengthens the democratic fabric. Since women's presence is seemed to be low in Indian politics, it is the necessary to make women aware of their rights and motivate them for participation in mainstream politics. The constitution of India under Articles 325 and 326 guarantee equal right to participate in political activities effectively. However, lack of space for participation in political process has not only resulted in their absence in numbers of decision making bodies but also neglect their common issues and problems. For strong and effective democratic system, the participation of women is essential. There cannot be any real democracy if the voices and issues of women are ignored or sidelined. This paper analyzes the participation of women in politics and also analyzes whether or not women's voices and demands are articulated to the public as matters of importance.

**Keywords:** empowerment, political participation, representation, position of women, democratic system, reservation

### Introduction

*"When the history of India's fight for independence comes to be written the sacrifice made by the women of India will occupy foremost place"* Mahatma Gandhi

Democracy is a system of government where people participate either directly or indirectly in the process of governance. In this context, the problem of low participation of women is of special concern; women's participation in decision-making system is essential for effective governance. Therefore democracy implies equality for all citizens either men or women. As against this basic notion of democracy what is normally seen is that women are generally excluded from different walks of life, and more visibly in Politics. The U.N. observes that women constitute "world's largest excluded category". For the attainment of true democratic spirit better political participation of women shall be ensured. Democracy will fail in its objectives if women lack equal opportunity to participate in the governmental decision making process. They are to be equal partners in the nation-building and political development. Citizens' participation in political affairs is important because a situation which results in high participation by members of a group normally has higher potential for democracy. Equal treatment and opportunity to women in political life should start from the grassroots level. To provide training and practice in the process of decision-making, the rural democratic institutions are the ideal structures to begin with. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is to accomplish this purpose. The question of political empowerment of women in rural India has assumed considerable significance after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of India. This amendment

provides reservation of seats and posts of chairperson to women in all grassroots level democratic institutions in the country and this act has brought a silent revolution in the political empowerment of women in India.

### Objectives

1. To know the role of women in the political arena and their political consciousness.
2. To examine the causes responsible for low level participation of women in Indian Politics.
3. To explore the constraints faced by women in performing their role in electoral politics.
4. To find out the position of women in National Parliament.

### Research Methodology

The information for this paper has been primarily collected from secondary sources i.e., Books, Journal, Government reports and Internet.

### Political participation before independence

In India, women have been given an exalted position in society. During ancient times they were treated at par with men even in political and philosophical spheres. However, down the centuries, the position of women in society deteriorated and politically they were pushed to the background. It was only in the twentieth century, particularly during the freedom movement under the charismatic leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, that involvement of women was accepted as the natural course in India. In fact, Gandhi's notions and approach towards the role of women in the freedom struggle stood in sharp contrast to the age-old prejudices against them ingrained in the Indian psyche. The social condition of women was quite appalling in those times

and it was primarily due to the conscious efforts of the leadership, at the forefront of the freedom struggle, that women fought against the might of the British empire in partnership with men. Gandhi believed that women have to play a much meaningful role in politics, making it more accountable, transparent and corruption free. Writing in *Harijan* on 21 April 1946, he emphasized the need to “enroll women as voters, impart or have imparted to them practical education, teach them to think independently, release them from the chains of caste that bind them so as to bring about a change in them...If they will do this, they will purify the present unclean atmosphere.” He prophetically said, “as long as the women of India do not take part in public life, there can be no salvation for the country.” Our freedom struggle was viewed by the national leaders in a wider perspective of restructuring the socio-economic and future political set up, to provide in it, among other things, equality of both men and women. It is worth mentioning that way back in 1920 Smt. Sarojini Naidu and Ms. Margaret Cousins led a group of women to demand equal rights of representation for the fair sex in the Indian Provincial Legislatures. Tilak was of the view that political action on the part of women could be independent of their social status and that political action was possibly more important than social reform in empowering women.

#### **Participation of women in post independent period**

In post-independence India, large number of women's autonomous groups has sprung up challenging patriarchy and taking up a variety of issues such as violence against women greater share for women in political decision making etc both at the activist and academic level. India has a rich and vibrant women's movement but it has still a long way to go to achieve gender equality and gender justice. Women's empowerment is still a debatable issue in India. She is still treated as a second class citizen and the reason besides are illiteracy, customs, traditions, poverty, ignorance, her own lack of interest in her own political empowerment leads to such government policies, which lack proper insight and direction. It is important for the empowerment of women that the women actively participate in the political process of nation.

#### **Constitutional Provisions**

The Constitution of India adopted a parliamentary form of government and guarantees justice, liberty and equality to all citizens (men and women). The Constitution not only grants equality of treatment to women but also calls upon the state to adopt measures favouring women neutralizing the socio-economic, educational and political disadvantages that they face. Therefore adoption of our Constitution heralded a new era of equality for women of India. It guarantees equal political rights including the right to vote to women. Almost all the provisions contained in the UN Convention on the 'Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women' are there in the Indian Constitution.

Not only does the Constitution guarantee equal political status to women, there is even a scope for 'positive discrimination' in their favour as is evident in Article 15(3) of the Constitution. There are many other provisions in the

Constitution which lay stress on equality between men and women. Article 14 guarantees equality before law and equal protection of law within the territory of India. Art 15 prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth. It is a guarantee against every form of discrimination. According to article 15(3), nothing shall prevent the state from making special provisions for the benefit women and children. Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity for all citizens in matter relating to employment or appointment to any office under state. Secondly no citizen shall, on ground of religion, race, cast, sex, decent, place of birth residence or any of them, be eligible for, or discriminated against in respect of any employment or office under the state and strength of workers, men and women, and the tender age of children are not abused and that citizen are not forced by economic necessity to enter occupations unsuited for their age or strength.

Article 39 (a), states that the State shall direct its policy towards securing equally to men and women the right to an adequate means of livelihood, and 39(d) enjoins the State to direct its policy towards securing equal pay for equal work for both men and women. Article 42 provides for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief and Article 51(A) (e) refers to the fundamental duty of citizens to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments have provided reservation of 1/3 seats for women in panchayats and municipalities. Article 325 and 326 guarantee political equality, equal right to participate in political activity and right to vote, respectively. While the latter has been accessed and enjoyed by large number of women, the right to equal participation is still a distant dream. The lack of space for participation in political bodies has resulted in their presence in meagre numbers in this decision making bodies.

Women's are the world's largest excluded group in political arena. 21.9 % of the members of national parliament worldwide are women. Women hold 16.0 % of the seats in Arab state parliaments and 21.8 % of the seats in Sub-Saharan African nation's parliament. In Americas women hold 26.6 %. On the other hand in the developed nations of USA, France and Japan 18.3 %, 26.2 %, 8.1 % respectively of the House of Representatives of Lower House of parliament are comprised of women. In India women comprised only 11.4 % of National Parliament.

#### **Women in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha**

The 16th Lok Sabha in India (2014) comprised 62 women members only 11.41% of the total Lok Sabha membership. While it has increased from 10.86% in 2009, it is almost half of the world average of 22.2%. The Rajya Sabha does not much better representation, with just 29 women members comprising 11.9% of the total membership in 2014. Again, while this is an improvement from the 2009 figure of 8.97%, it is far below the world average of 19.6%. It comes as no surprise then that India is ranked 141 in the world rankings of women in national parliaments, compiled by the inter-parliamentary union. India's rank is one of the lowest in the region and falls below her neighbours, Nepal ranked at 40, Afghanistan at 45, China at 71, Pakistan 86.

**Table 1:** Status of women in Raj Sabha

Year	Total No Raj Sabha Seats	Women MPs	% of women MPs
1952	219	16	7.3
1957	237	18	7.6
1962	238	18	7.6
1967	240	20	8.3
1971	243	17	7.0
1977	244	25	10.2
1980	244	24	9.8
1985	244	28	11.4
1990	245	38	15.5
1996	223	20	9.0
1998	223	19	8.06
2004	245	27	11.1
2009	245	22	8.97
2014	245	29	11.83

**Table 2:** Status of women in lok Sabha

Year	Total No of Lok sabha seats	No Women MPs	% of women MPs
1952	499	22	4.41
1957	500	27	5.40
1962	503	34	6.76
1967	523	31	5.93
1971	521	22	4.22
1977	544	19	3.29
1980	544	28	5.15
1984	544	44	8.9
1989	517	27	5.22
1991	544	39	7.17
1999	543	49	9.02
2004	543	45	8.03
2009	543	59	10.86
2014	543	62	11.41

### Women in Panchayati Raj Institution

The 73rd and 74th amendment of Indian Constitution have brought about a silent revolution by the provisions related to 33% reservation for women in the institutions of local self-government. They have brought a drastic transformation in India as far as participation of women at the grass root level politics is concerned.

Women in India are much better represented in the panchayati raj institutions as compared to the parliament. States like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Rajasthan have reserved 50 per cent seats for women in panchayats and Sikkim has reserved 40 per cent seats for women. This indeed, makes a historic beginning for the effective participation of women in the decision-making process at the grassroots level. The efforts and work of several women representatives in panchayats in Maharashtra, Gujarat and West Bengal have been widely acclaimed. Thus, women are making significant gains in the political sphere where increased participation is rapidly empowering women.

However, women have not found an adequate representation in the Lok Sabha. The percentage of elected women Lok Sabha members has never exceeded 12 per cent. The presence of women in the Upper House has been only slightly higher overall, probably due to indirect elections and nomination of some women members.

Most political parties agreed to introduce 33 per cent reservation for women in Parliament and State Legislatures. When the Bill was introduced in 1997, several parties and groups raised objections. The objections focused around two main issues: first, the issue of overlapping quotas for women in general and those for women of the lower castes; second, the issue of elitism. The Bill was first introduced by Dev Gowda led United Front Government. The demand for sub-quotas for OBCs and minorities is seen a way of stalling reservation for women; there are no instances of political parties having such quotas in their own cadres. The Bill has already been introduced several times, but is stalled each time. However, the Rajya Sabha on March 9, 2010, took a 'historic step' by passing this bill and provided one-third reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies for women. The key feature of the bill is that one-third of all seats on the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies will be reserved for women. The reservation will work as a quota within quota – 1/3 of the seats will be reserved for SC and ST women. Till today the bill neither have been passed by the Lok Sabha nor ratified by one half of the states before it comes into effect.

### Conclusion

Women's empowerment can positively influence the lives not only of women themselves but also of men, and of course, those of children. Political parties cannot remain indifferent towards women who constitute 586.5 million population and nearly 48.46 per cent of the electorate (2011 census). Although almost all political parties have attempted to build women organisations to secure their support and make their organisations more broad based, but in practice they have fielded much less proportion of women candidates in the elections giving them proportionately much less representation in the legislative bodies than their actual population strength. It is necessary to make it mandatory for all political parties to nominate at least a-third of women candidates in their party organisations and laid the foundation of political participation of women. Women are the legal citizens of the country and have equal rights with men. Although the country's constitution says women have equal status to men, women are powerless and are mistreated inside and outside the home. Gender equality in the realm of politics continues to be elusive even today.

Therefore all the trends indicate that women's representation in politics requires special consideration, and cannot be left to the forces that presently dominate our parties and government. Today, even the best of our female parliamentarians feel sidelined and powerless within their respective parties. The few women in leadership positions have not been able to encourage the entry of greater numbers of women in electoral and party politics, and are an ineffective minority within their own respective political groupings. Therefore, it is urgently required that we have to take special measures to enhance women's political participation in ways that help them influence decision-making at all levels of our society and polity. Our democracy seriously flawed if it fails to yield adequate space to women for their political empowerment.

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