

Women Empowerment & Representation in Contemporary India: Women in Indian Politics

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Abstract:

There have been important changes in women in Indian politics over the years, illustrating wider social, economic, and cultural changes in the country. Women in India have faced several obstacles in political participation, historically, with social norms confining them to domestic work and limiting their engagement in public life. But the horizon definitely brightened in terms of female political leaders after independence, eventually highlighting people like Indira Gandhi, our first female Prime Minister. It was a major step towards indicating the possibility of a woman reaching the government ladder in the Indian political scene. However, women continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in Indian politics even after such initial successes. While the Constitution of India gives equal rights to all citizens, and men-folk always talk about equal rights, the political domain is still male dominated. The ongoing biases against women, the expectations of a woman in society as a caretaker and families of men lead to their involvement in politics being restricted, especially in a leadership role. As far as political representation of women in India is concerned, our numbers in the Lok Sabha & Rajya Sabha are about 11-15% depending on the party, so we rank relatively low in the world.

Nevertheless, a good progress is made to bring women into these places from the grassroot. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments were adopted in 1992 and reserved one-third of the seats in Panchayats (local government bodies) for women making local governance a stronghold for their participation. However, barriers to women representing at the national level remain as these measures have facilitated increased political consciousness and participation by women.

A prime policy initiative in this regard has been the 33% reservation for women in both houses of Parliament, formalized through the Women's Reservation Bill. Even if Indian political parties felt greater urgency in fielding female candidates, for women to be most empowered politically, having a significant presence in the electorate, would likely be the catalyst for more sweeping reforms, a statement at this point less than needed as female members still comprise a small number of their respective assemblies and often represent more traditional views.

To sum up, even though women have made substantial stepping in the politics of India, yet, their total political empowerment and equal representation still a distant dream blazing in the Indian society, warranting continuous attention and systemic change.

Keywords :- Representing, Governmental, Constitutional, reforms, empowerment.

Introduction:

Women in Indian Politics: A Journey Through Decades The role of women in politics and society has changed and grown from decade to decade in India. Women in politics have made both progress and faced challenges, in a

country where patriarchal values and long-standing gender roles have often influenced both the public and private sectors. The contribution of women to the Indian Independence Movement can be traced back to its early days, through household names such as Sarojini Naidu, Kasturbha Gandhi, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, who actively fought for national independence alongside her ideals of women's rights. The early activists paved the way for integration of women into the political mainstream of India, which was eventually signified by a leader like Indira Gandhi, the 1st and so far the only female Prime Minister of India.

But as it turns out, the successes of the past were very few and women in India have continued to remain underrepresented in politics. While India has achieved impressive progress in many fields – from education to employment to social welfare, representation of women in political offices, both at national and state level, has been left behind. The meager representation of women in the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, and other level legislative bodies point towards constant governmental apathy towards replication of women in Indian politics. The shortage in representation is due to underlying social norms, gender bias, and less support structures in the political parties.

However, India had witnessed a growing movement for women empowerment in politics at the grassroots level. Many women have been empowered to take part in governance and politics through Constitutional amendments reserving seats for women in local bodies like Panchayats. These advancement are indeed significant but further reform and policy resourcing are needed to ensure women continue to make significant strides in their political representation and leadership roles within the Indian political landscape to complete the journey to gender equality in Indian politics.

Brief History of Women in Politics in India:

Women and politics in India are intricately intertwined with the history of the movement for independence as well as the social reform movement over the decades. Outside of Western India, women were overwhelmingly shunted into domesticity by conservative cultural values, and thus excluded from most political activity in pre-independent India. But nevertheless, a handful of visionary women leaders became the corner stone of the very political entity the state of Pakistan. By taking active participation in the freedom struggle fighters, personalities like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Vijayalakshmi Pandit became symbols of resistance and empowerment. One of such persons was Sarojini Naidu who rose as a leader of the Indian National Congress and also was the first woman ever to be an president of Indian National Congress in 1925 hence proving there lives copy paste political strength of women.

The positive changes brought in by independence were many, and the constitution of India in 1950 gave women equal rights and sexual rights, allowing them to vote and enjoy their right to democratic life and functioning together with men. Despite the legal guarantees, nonetheless, women would remain sidelined in political offices. In the early post-independence years of India, women in politics were largely ornamental; they had minimal input in influencing policy at the higher ranks of political decision-making. The turning point came in 1966 when Indira Gandhi was appointed as Prime Minister to show that women can reach the highest echelons of political power in India. Gandhi became an iconic female Prime Minister and role model for female politicians everywhere.

But challenging was the mixed fate of women, who, after initial gains, found themselves as outsiders again in the great sweep of mainstream politics. Societal pressures on women, deeply entrenched patriarchy, and strong resistance from male-dominated political parties and institutions made women's participation mainly symbolic. Nonetheless, women participation in politics started to rise gradually with these barriers enabling the path for future reforms and political empowerment of women in India.

Evolving Scenario for Women in Indian Politics:

The status of women in politics in India today is indeed a story of progress and paralysis. Safe to say, we have come a long way in women's political activity but the representation and empowerment of women still seem like a far cry from their potential. Today, women in India are entering into politics in every height of the fields starting from the state level to national level since women are occupying significant public offices. Women like Mamata Banerjee, Mayawati, Sushma Swaraj and Sonia Gandhi have shown that there is no dearth of women in key leadership roles in Indian politics. Mamata Banerjee, today the Chief Minister of West Bengal, and Mayawati, who was Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, defied traditional class, caste and gender roles to become political leaders in their own right. India under Aman had a prominent Foreign Minister in Sushma Swaraj, who too has since emerged as a major voice on Indian foreign policy.

These might sound like examples of women in leadership, and out of the larger context of women's representation in India — deeply anchored in political institutions — they are. In fact, the representation of women in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of Parliament) and Rajya Sabha (the upper house) levels has not seen much change as of recently, forming about 11-15% of the Parliament body overall, which is a rate significantly lower than the global average. This lack of representation reflects the systemic and social obstacles that women continue to encounter in politics. The predominance of patriarchal structures within political parties, poverty and lack of resources for most women, ideological barriers arising from gender stereotypes, and social networks dominated by men all constrain women's participation in politics.

On the other hand, grassroots-level political engagement has proven to be more effective if we consider the example of reserving, through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, one-third of the seats in local bodies for women. It has given women a seat at the governance table, allowing them to have a say in issues and policy decisions that affect her life locally. However, attaining better representation of women at the national level continues to be a major obstacle, where transforming the political power of women in India will require more laws and changing the societal paradigms.

Message To Clamps To Empowerment of Women in Indian Politics:

The power of women in Indian politics is not something that happened overnight; in fact, it was just the opposite. Political empowerment of women — or the process by which women have gained greater access to leadership positions in policymaking, political processes and representation of female and other marginalized interests — has been met with a great deal of contention. However, in the last couple of decades, we have witnessed an increasing

demand for gender equality in politics which has been translated into actions for promoting women's participation and representation.

Most significant steps taken in this direction are Constitutional Amendments to reserve one-third of the seats in Panchayats (local governance) and urban local bodies for women (73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, 1992). This path-breaking policy has transformed political participation for women, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. This provided a platform for women to have a political leadership role and also assisted in introducing new norms in respect to the role women would play in government. Women getting represented in local bodies has allowed them to tackle essential problems such as healthcare access, education, sanitation, and the general well-being of their respective communities.

However, this empowerment is not without its challenges when it comes to Indian politics. The men-dominated political parties across the world provide little assistance to female candidates.

Patriarchal nature of political parties: Parties place little focus on gender-sensitive policies and lack the necessary infrastructure for success of women candidates, thus stifling their political career. Concurrent with this, female politicians are also subjected to negative biases and antagonism from their peers within the parties, as well as the general public, which complicates their efforts to appear competent and effective in the political battlefield.

Legislative initiatives like the Women's Reservation Bill, which seeks to reserve 33% seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women, however, show a persistent desire for political gender equality. While that bill has not passed, it is part of the ongoing push for national political empowerment of women. There was a note on the aspect of social and economic in the case of women empowerment in politics, which is an integral point since education, employment, and health contribute to the extent to which women can accomplish their political representation. While India as a nation progresses toward the goal of gender symmetry, keeping political institutions, political parties and society at large on track to enable women to be fully involved in every aspect of the body politic and represented within every institution, must remain a priority.

Advocacy-Making Downgraded: A Closer Look at Women in Politics:

While the overall status of women in politics has improved over time, the political status of women in India remains rife with difficulties as there are several social, cultural, and institutional obstacles that still need to be addressed. For example, one of the main problems is that reality of patriarchal practices and gender stereotyped perceptions prevailing against maximum involvement of women from public life. Such orthodox thinking usually perceives women as the mainstay of the household, making it difficult for them to pursue careers, discouraging them from dreaming of becoming politicians and denying them the opportunity and space to participate in the political process. This ultimately paints women as ill-equipped for leadership roles, which circulates into the ability of women to find acceptance and success in political spaces.

Another crucial hurdle is insufficient support in political parties. Most political parties remain male-centric and hold outdated beliefs that continue to see women as support candidates. It results in women being excluded from major political roles and decision-making entities. Moreover, political parties have a proclivity for nominating

male candidates due to their perception that men make for better voter bases in election good constituencies. Consequently, women are often excluded from party nominations and from the money needed to run effective campaigns, which serves to further hinder their political success.

Additionally, the broader political climate is still very combative and competitive, and women, particularly women of color and other underrepresented populations women, experience very significant barriers to going through the process. They also tend to miss out on the networks and mentorship that are available for men. That gap not only hampers their ability to climb the leadership ladder, it hinders their capacity to sway policy that impacts women and other marginalized populations the most.

Finally, political violence and intimidation is a huge barrier for women, deterring them from running for office and remaining in office. Unlike their male counterparts, women in politics are vulnerable to many challenges, from violence to social shunning. Such hurdles still impede women from truly attaining political power and representation in political organizations in India.

Government Schemes and Policies for Women Participation:

Gender Parity: The Indian government is taking great steps towards female representation and has initiated a range of schemes and policies to boost the women folk in politics. Among these measures, the most important was the promulgation of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992 that reserved one-third of the seats in rural and urban local governing bodies for women. The groundbreaking policy sought to broaden women's access to the grassroots decision making process and to prompt their participation in local politics. This has led to an enhancement in political visibility of women and their participation in governance with an increase in women holding offices in the Panchayats (rural councils) and municipalities.

Apart from local body reservations, the government had also pressed for large representation of women in national politics. The Women's Reservation Bill was a contentious issue of consideration of reserving 33% of seats in Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. While the bill still has to go through Parliament, it has sparked debate about the adequacy of female representation in the political system. If it were to pass it would greatly increase the political empowerment of women nationally.

In addition to this, different government schemes has been continued to uplift the status of women and to raise their general socio-economic condition that acts as boost up for their entry in politics. Policies such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) aimed at promoting the welfare and education of girls also eventually help in creating an electorate of women who are more politically aware and empowered. Furthermore, women have gained economic empowerment through employment provided by the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), as it is important in itself for political participation. While these are encouraging steps, major challenges still remain, and the focus of the government is to create a facilitative environment through legislation and social code designed to foster active participation of women in Indian politics.

The Way Forward:

WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS: THE WAY AHEAD: The path forward for women in Indian politics entails continued work both at the institutional level and the societal level to alleviate the obstacles that continue to hinder their path to success. Passing the Women's Reservation Bill, which will account for 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, is a major pressure point. It should even serve as an important step in the right direction that promotes fairness in representation and allows for obtaining a more powerful voice when it comes to women taking leads in national matters. Gender-sensitive policies by political parties, which create an enabling environment for women and give them access to resources to successfully campaign for political office, are also critical.

At the grassroots level, we must continue supporting the participation of women in local governance with the reservation of seats in panchayats and urban local bodies. It will serve to build the political confidence of women to pursue higher political office. In parallel there is a need to improve political literacy by empowering women to participate in political discussions and decision-making and building networks of women leaders to uplift each other. Additionally, societal perceptions of female involvement in politics will also have to shift. They must both play their part in deconstructing patriarchy, so that women not only can also be, but must also be, leaders. Increased inclusion, support and overall a gender-sensitive political space will boost the transition of Indian politics into an avenue where women can confidently and fully realize their empowerment.

Conclusion:

Although women in India have made strides regarding political participation and empowerment, a number of obstacles continue to become a barrier in the way of their representation in the political realm. They have struggled for years, facing cultural and societal norms, but also institutional barriers which limit their political engagement. Women can contribute to the process to a greater degree but the growing presence of women in state and national leadership positions shows it is not yet where it should be. It is women who have changed the destiny of this country, like Indira Gandhi, Mamata Banerjee, Mayawati and many others, and this is proof that political leadership does not talk about gender but ability and vision. Nonetheless, the continuing low numbers of women in legislatures and the absence of adequate gender-responsive politics in political parties remains a serious challenge. Hope Addressing the constitutional amendments and local body reservations have paved the way for the empowerment of women, but these still need to be complemented by ensuring gender equality at higher levels of governance. This requires both the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill and many more political parties offering women-friendly policies.

But the real concern in this long road of empowerment of women in Indian politics is more a figure game but an impetus power to access and design the policies which affect them into their day-to-day lives. It necessitates dismantling patriarchy, advocacy education, consciousness, and a politically conducive atmosphere. Achieving more gender equality in Indian politics will require ongoing legislative reform, social transformation, and sustained effort on the part of both men and women to create a political system in which women are not just represented but also empowered. Top of Form

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