



Politics and women

Dr. Reetesh Jain

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, SS Jain Subodh PG (Autonomous) College, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

Abstract

Any assessment of women's participation in Indian politics and leadership roles requires a study of their roles during freedom movement and their part in political processes and organization. These roles, as is well known, are influenced by religion, customs, patriarchy and other factors. In this context some assessment are worth mentioning. The attempt to assess and evaluate the level and extent of political participation of women become very much relevant as to the nature and functioning of the political system as a whole. It is particularly more beneficial to political parties and political leaders due to the natural qualities of women such as honesty, affection and sense of duty. The mobilization of women in large numbers weakened the bondage of tradition and encouraged them to develop a perspective on the wider socio-political problems.

Keywords: women, leadership, political

Introduction

Democracy implies equality for all human persons, men and women. As against this basic notion of democracy what is normally seen is that women are excluded from different walks of life, more visibly in Politics. The U.N. observes that women constitute "world's largest excluded category". For the attainment of true democratic spirit shall be ensured better political participation. "In the struggle for gender justice", Usha Narayanan argues, "Political participation constitutes the first and foremost step in that direction.". Equal treatment to women in political life, to be meaningful and effective 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. One of the aims of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is to accomplish this purpose. "The question of political empowerment of women in rural India has assumed considerable significance recently because of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The amendment provides reservation of seats and posts of chairperson for women in all grassroots level democratic institutions in the countryside known as panchayats. This is a historic step of far reaching implications and significant repercussions on the political process in rural India.

Women and politics in India

The Indian society is full of paradoxes. On the one hand, foreigners come in hordes to our country in search of spiritual solace but on the other hand, Indians rank among the most corrupt people in the world. Again, on the one hand, India is spending millions, many; billions to send satellites to space to prove its scientific prowess but on the other the state cannot provide almost half the population with the basic necessities of food, education, health and shelter. The same paradox exists in the case of women too. On the one hand, the scriptures put them on a high pedestal. An old Sanskrit proverb is that, where the women are held in reverence there

do the gods reside. The traditional belief in the Indian society is that, a society grows if the women grow, if they partake of the spirit of progress, for they are proverbial domestic legislators, they are the matrix of social life In the Indian mythology, even God is regarded as half man, half woman-'ardh-narishwara'. On the other hand, according to the UNICEF's recent international report, "The Progress of Nations 1997", more than 5000 dowry deaths occur every year in India. "Women's lives in India and the world over are circumscribed by what can be termed as five 'Ps' Patriarchy, Productive resources access inadequacy, Poverty, Promotion advancement insufficiency and powerlessness". It is estimated that women do two-thirds of the world's work. In exchange they receive only 10 percent of all the income and own a mere one percent of the entire world's means of production. It is a fact that the real social status and the real level of political participation of women cannot be inlayed in isolation. On the contrary it is interlinked with the socio-economic conditions, political climate and inequalities inherent in the traditional social structure, its norms and values, customs and rituals. All these factors together determine the actual social status of women. Not only that, women's status differs according to region, caste, class and religion and also on considerations of tribal, rural and urban areas." The status of a person is a great force in participating wholeheartedly in the developmental process. In the case of women, their inferior status relegated to them due to fundamentalism of tradition and religious beliefs blocked them from active participation in developmental process. Historically women are supposed to carry forward the traditions, norms and the values of society. The process of socialization that they undergo in their families does not prepare them for non-traditional roles. Now, it is reasonable to enquire about what the mainstream Indian culture expects a woman to be. In order to get a satisfactory answer to such a question, one will have to go through the corridors of the history of India.

Women in the freedom movement

With regard to participation of women in Freedom Struggle, India had a rich past, unlike western countries. During the freedom movement, a few women belonging to the upper strata of the society were brought into the mainstream of politics. Gandhi's attempt to uplift women had less impact at the grass root level. Usha and Usha give an estimate of women's participation in the Indian National Congress. After the setting up of Indian National Congress, ten women delegates from educated and progressive families, attended the Congress session in 1889 for the first time. In 1897, many women attended the Congress as delegates. Most of the women who attended the Congress worked as volunteers and very few participated in deliberations. However, there is no denying the fact that their very presence at the Congress session was enough to be a qualitative difference in the nature of organization. As Sarojini Naidu said, * when the air is full of the spirit of non-discrimination, I do not see why it is necessary that a woman must speak. Even though in large numbers, women's participation was a part of mass national movement, certain roles were performed by them during the Freedom Movement, in the Ashrams, Congress committees, leadership roles in Salt Satyagraha. And their part was not negligible in revolutionary, peasant, workers and such movements which were part of the national Freedom Movement.

Women and revolutions

Revolutionaries also took part in the Nationalist Movement, by adopting the extreme and violent methods for achieving the goals. Kalpana Dutt, inspired by Chittagong Armory, joined the revolutionary organizations at an early age and she worked vigorously in the movement from 1930 to 1933 and got transportation for life. Prithi Latha, a senior revolutionary during freedom movement, led a group of seven in an attack on the European Club at Pahartali in the suburbs of Chittagong on 25th sept, 1931. All other members of the group escaped but Prithi Latha committed suicide. In her pocket, she carried a message to "the women of India. It said, "Women today have taken the firm resolution that they will not remain in the background... I earnestly hope that our sisters would not nurse the feeling that they are weak. With this hope in my heart, I am proceeding today for self-immolation". While expressing her will she wanted to show that women could also sacrifice their lives for the country. Such was the dedication of women in the Freedom Movement. Women's Participation in Army Upsurge & Trade Union Movement: Participation in trade unions and working in raw upsurge were recognized as part of patriotic activity. Ahilya Rangekar and Vimala Ranadive participated in various strikes during freedom movement. They led the women and organized women towards supporting historic struggles in 1946. When an Army Upsurge was going on in 1946, it was women who performed services to the army people and were attacked by the police. 32,000 army personnel in different posts were supported by the organized leadership of Viroala Ranadive and Ahilya Rangekar. According to Vimala Ranadive, women's participation was "very efficient" during that struggle. Leela Sundarayya dedicated her life for the working class and participated in Telengana Peasants'

Movement. Subsequently, she worked tirelessly for the Communist Party of India. Usha-tai Dange, an eminent woman leader of the working class, fought against the social evils on the one hand and on the other organised the working class women, poverty stricken peasants, and also lower class women. Renu Chakravarthi from Bengal, Parin Ramesh Chandra from Punjab, Suseela Gopalan from South India, Moturi Ddayam from Andhra Pradesh participated for the working class benefits.

Women in politics in post-independent India

The constitution of free India has guaranteed all its citizens justice, liberty, equality and dignity through several provisions like documents of fundamental rights and directive principles. The constitution of India is the best in the world which has taken care of the underprivileged and the minorities. All our laws get their sanction from this constitution and any law which violates a provision of the constitution is declared unconstitutional. The framers of the constitution realize that a true democracy requires not only equality but also justice. This notion resulted in the Indian constitution, which not only grants equality to women but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women for neutralizing the cumulative socio-economic, educational and political disadvantages faced by them. Several articles are incorporated in the constitution in order to materialize the desired objective of equality and justice for the women in India. Besides the preamble, the articles of the constitution, which impinge on our subject of enquiry are Articles 14,15,16 under part III, Articles 39, 42, 44 under part IV, Article 5 1 - A(c) under part IV A and Article 246 under part XI are noteworthy. The right to vote can be said to be the starting point in the struggle of women for their political equality and participation. An analysis of the political participation of women by way of voting has been growing but with variations.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the honorific position granted to women in the pre and post Aryan period and in the Vedic times, that too in a substantive and mandatory manner, made binding on society by the tenets of religion and observance, women of later periods spanning between the middle and modern ages have been denied their rightful place of honor owing to a variety of reason both religious and mundane. Indian society, a vertex of innumerable caste and communal combinations, has paid scant regards for the education and welfare of women culminating in child marriage, sati, ban on widow marriage, and divorce, to name a few atrocities on them. It is a pity that the rulers never tried to irritate the orthodox religious beliefs by initiating reform, which would enhance the prestige and status of women. Even the few women who hobnobbed with Mahatma Gandhi and the frontline leaders of the freedom movement were from rich and educated milieu and did not represent the backward and downtrodden womenfolk of India subjected to all kinds of exploitations and tortures. The leaders of both pre and post independent India paid nothing lip service to the upliftment of women in various walks of life including rightful representation in the legislatures, both at the centre and in the states, with the result that even now women do not

enjoy pride of place in the power centers of legislation, administration and party leadership. It is to be viewed with concern that NGOs which played a dominant role in social renaissance elsewhere in the world with remarkable success, have not paid due attention in India to cause of women's political participation and empowerment which would have transformed the face of its administration, political culture and sense of values considerably for the better. To conclude, women leaders and women with the support of 'Apolitical dynasty' have played an important role in the Indian elections and women leaders supporting ideology, charisma and commitment participate in a big way for the success of elections. But how far the elections have empowered these women is a big question. Their services are usually better utilized for the success of elections.

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