

Political Participation of Women in India

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Abstract:

True citizenship involves meaningful participation in politics. To be meaningful for citizens, participation must at a minimum level be voluntary and consequential. Although political participation might appear rather straight forward, a close look reveals some ironies. For example, participation is sometimes most extensive in totalitarian societies, where it is meaningless because the state commands everybody to participate. By contrast, political participation is hit-or-miss in democratic countries, where citizens are free to decide whether to participate or not.

Key Words: Amendment, Constitutional, Independence, Participation, Women.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The word 'participation' refers to those voluntary activities by which the members of a society take part in decision-making in the different processes and aspects of the development activities at the different levels of the government. It implies that people do so as matter of their role as sovereign in the democratic form of the government. The area of their participation involves administrative decisions and implementations conduct to development.

The real purpose of the participation is to develop the human capabilities for developing decision-making skills. Participation means a kind of the local autonomy in which people discover the possibilities of exercising their choice and thereby becoming capable of managing their own development.

Participation as defined in a UNESCO document is "collective sustained activity for the purpose of achieving some common objectives, especially a more equitable distribution of the benefits of the development". Although participation is defined in different ways, the dominant view is to regard it as a strategy to improve the development process, (UNESCO 1978: 15). Cohen and Uphoof defined participation as 'people's participation in the decision making', (Cohen and Uphoof 1980:213). Santhanam's definition gives wider meaning to the term. According to him participation as commitment on the part of individual towards all forms of action by which the individual can 'take part' or 'play role' in the operation without being conscious of the socio-economic barriers, to achieve certain common goals in a group situation', (Santhanam 1993:419). Jadav, emphasis on the voluntary participation of the people. In his perspective 'involvement of the people in the development process voluntarily and willingly, such participation cannot be coerced,' (Jadav 1985: 68). The synthesis of the given views of the scholars is participation involves mass involvement in the activities and deciding the goals, those are of the common interest. There are plenty of words analogous to the term participation, viz., involvement, support, empowerment, mobilization, joining-in, co-operation, etc., (Jaseph 1997: 53-54).

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In simple language, political participation refers to those voluntary activities by which the members of a society take part in the selection of rulers at different levels of the government, directly or indirectly associate themselves in the process of formulating a public policy.

Political participation is an essential element of the political system. Among other things, it involves voting at the polls and participation in political party activities. It is an integral part of democratic political system. Participation of more people in the political processes and political institutions create a healthy system of democracy unless they participate according to their free will. It has been observed by political scientists that maximum participation means more legitimacy to the activities of the Government, political stability resulting thereby in the respect for authorities, (Mukhi 1997: 254)

Participation in political process has been subject of abiding interest in Political Science since the days of Plato. Aristotle defined citizen as one who takes part in the administration of the justice and holds office. The

Declaration of French Revolution of 1789 also declares that all citizens have right to take part personally or by their representatives in the formulation of law. Marx argued that universal participation is a means and an end of the manifestation of human freedom. The behavioural revolution which rejuvenated the academic discipline of Political Science in fifties and sixties of the nineteenth century, concentrated on the study of political behaviour, voting behaviour and electoral process. In the context of voting behaviour, the term 'political participation' has acquired new and more dynamic connotation, (Patni 1994: 87).

The denial of the participation to the people in the political system leaves no other way out but to resort to the violent methods for bringing about a change. Today, even military dictators and totalitarian states make some arrangements for the people participation in the system in a limited way. There is some semblance of approval of their action by the people to pose to be their concerns for the peoples will. In democracy, the term political participation stands for the approval and withdrawal by the people to those whom they have given right to govern. It implies that rulers shall rule only with the consent of people and masses must be taken into confidence while performing the duties for the welfare of society and people. The questions why and how political institutions are made to undertake different types of decisions/actions are to be taken/answered by the masses. Though democracy as system of governance exist in many parts of the world yet the extent of political participation varies from country to country. In a nutshell political participation means a system in which the people have rights and are actually involved in political institutions and processes. Political participation by the masses through various modes legitimizes the decision making process.

Different levels of political participation in democratic system are due to various social, economic and cultural conditions prevailing in the society. Actually, it is not only constitutional provisions/ reservation policy that bring the masses up to the top level of political participation but also other determinants such as education, family, economic structure, health, political awareness, political enthusiasm, culture and tradition etc. which ensure complete political participation.

Political participation in a democratic system is known by many parameters. Most acceptable parameters of political participation are; (i) voting at the polls, (ii) participation in pre-election propaganda activities (iii) participation in different activities of political parties (iv) membership in related pressure groups (v) activating political parties and pressure groups (vi) maintaining contact with the legislators or ministers (vii) offering oneself as a candidate (viii) holding press conference (ix) arranging demonstration etc. (x) forming trade union and arranging strike. International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences refer political participation to those voluntary activities by which members of the society share in the selection of rulers directly or indirectly in the formation of public policy, (Palmer 1976: 50-57).

MODES OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

There are different ways and modes through which citizens participate in politics. These modes differ from citizen to citizen in how and to what extent they participate and what are the purposes of their participation. Political acts could be hierarchically organized from the least difficult to the most difficult, (Milbrath and Geol 1997: 18-19). Verba and Nie grouped the activities by which citizens can participate in politics into four broad modes of participation i.e. voting activities, campaign activities, co-operative activities and citizen initiated contacts, (Verba and Nie 1972: 47).

Schonfeld has mentioned ten types of activities, which are often cited in the literature on political participation. These include; i) Running or holding, public or party office; ii) Belonging to party or other political organization; iii) Working in an election; iv) Attending political meeting or rallies; v) Making financial contribution to a party or a candidate; vi) Contacting a public official; vii) Publicly expressing a political opinion to convince others; viii) Taking part in political discussion; ix) Voting and x) Exposing oneself to political stimuli, (Schonfeld 1975: 136-37).

According to Sethi, participation in political process includes all activities e.g. attending public meetings, taking part in the agitation activities, attendance at study circles of political parties, voting in election, participation in election campaign, membership of political party, membership of pressure groups and membership in representative bodies etc, (Sethi 1988: 65).

Voting is considered as the simplest political activity that does not require much information and motivation as do most other political activities. Since a vote determines who holds elective public office, it exerts a pressure upon the leaders and is called as the blunt instrument of control over the government. Campaign activities require much initiative and have more collective effect upon decision-making process than voting. Membership in political party or voluntary organization is the co-operative mode of political participation. This mode of participation requires much initiative on the part of citizens. Contesting elections is considered as the highest and most serious form of political participation than other modes of political participation. Protest activities, such as marches, rallies, strikes and other such direct actions which are called unconventional method of political participations are generally considered as unhealthy for democracy, (Jharta

1998: 15-16). But slowly and gradually this type of participation is gaining ground in many developing countries of the world.

VARIABLES OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political participation is a complex process influenced by various variables or stimuli such as socio-economic, psychological and political. It is a dependent variable which depends upon various independent variables. These variables motivate or obstruct political participation of the people. Lane observed that socio-economic difference contributes relevantly to adult participation in politics. According to him political participation is a function of age, sex, education and status. He also refers to its complex relation to race, religion and national origin. Huntington and Dominguez established that the level of political participation tend to vary with socio-economic status, (Huntington and Dominguez 1975: 33).

Milbrath and Geol exhibit that the socio-economic status is positively related to unconventional political activities. Socio-economic variables include education, occupation, income, age, religion, race, sex, family background, mobility and residence. The authors have reported that people of higher socio-economic status especially those having higher education are more likely to be involved in politics. Political participation in middle age is higher and it declines in old age. The married persons have reported more participation in politics than that by single persons. The author indentified men's participation to be higher than that of women.

In relation to cross national comparison the male and female gap was found to be the smallest in the United States and the largest in India, with Japan, Austria and Nigeria falling between, (Mibrath and Geol 1977: 92). It has been found that upper status citizens have time, money and information to be effective in politics and there is a close relation between socio-economic position and political activity, (Verba and Nie 1972: 130). Rising women voter turnout also strengthens the given view that literacy. Social exposes, legal equality plays important role in deciding the nature of the participation.

Further, the political behaviour is a learnt behaviour and education plays a very significant role in shaping it. Occupation and residence also play very important role in political participation. The persons of higher occupational status and urban dwellers have been reported to participate more in politics. Education is an important variable to influence groups and their level and extent of participation. Political parties often attempt to increase the participation of inactive groups. Political parties help citizens to interpret political information and event. The articulate parties have high rate of people participation. A personal contact with party workers is more impressive way to vote or participate. Party identification also reflects the participation and it has an independent effect on participation and also reduces participation disparity between social groups. Clarity and attractiveness of issues mainly affect election day turnout and other political activities. Flow of propaganda also influences the participation. Political development and modernization change the participatory patterns in new nations. More modernized societies have higher political participation level than that of the less modernized ones, (Milbrath and Geol 1977: 102).

The intensity of political participation in the industrialized, urbanized and complex societies is higher than in the less developed, agricultural, rural and more primitive economic and social systems. In most of the countries people with higher education, income and occupational status tend to be more involved in the politics than those who are less endowed with these attributes. The organizational involvement also leads to the political participation. Social status also promotes participation primarily through changes in attitude about politics, (Huntington and Dominnaguez 1975: 33).

Nature and process of political participation varies from the society to society. It is not only the institutional arrangements those decide the level of the political participation. Informal processes such as the traditional cultural ethos, economic status are the determinant of the political participation of the people. With the passage of the time traditional and modern variables overlap and influence the process of the political participation in all the societies.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL PROCESSES IN INDIA

Generally participation of the women in the political processes implies the degree of the equality and freedom enjoyed by the women in shaping and sharing of the powers and value that is given by the society to the role which their male counterparts enjoy. Political participation of the women does not mean only women's participation in electoral and administrative process. But it also includes the whole range of the voluntary activities which has a bearing on the political process including voting, supporting political groups, communicating with legislators, disseminating political views and opinion among the electorates and other related activities.

Political participation of the women is an important determinant of their modernization. It enables women to come out of the shackles of the tradition and secluded life. It also leads to greater social and political awareness among the women. Women in politics can effectively represent opinions of the other women and can also understand and deal effectively with the problems of the society and of women in particular. Political

participation of the women equips them with political competence, organizational abilities and belief in egalitarianism and democratic planning. In this context, the attitudes of the women leaders towards the significance of political participation of the women have been analyzed, (Indira and Bohra 1999: 122). Women's role in politics is very less than that of men although there are many qualified women who can take more political responsibilities than what is commonly believed. This political subjection is more due to the prejudice against leadership role.

After Independence, Constitution of India has provided women equal rights of participation in political process of the country under Articles 14 and 15. After the enforcement of Indian Constitution in 1947, equality of both the sexes has been maintained by providing equal opportunity to both men and women in the democratic political process. But even after the independence the question of the participation of the women in the democratic political process at large remained in the background, (Singh 2007: 375). Reservation is one of the instruments of the political empowerment as it guarantees representation. The passing of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments can be considered as the greatest event for the women empowerment as it entails that the one-third of the seats are reserved for women in local bodies initially when the amendment was passed.

Besides the electoral system, the overall political atmosphere in the country discourages women from participating in the politics. Women have relatively less ability to use money, muscle power and other forms of influence in the public sphere. Criminalization of politics and the rising tide to violence have further discouraged the women. This exposure of Indian women to greater insecurity, corruption and criminalization has resulted in their aversion for the political scene.

Thus, women remain at the periphery of the power structure. They lack the political consciousness needed to formulate and implement policies in accordance with the aspirations of the women. Their presence is a mere symbolism rather than real power wielding. A successful democracy requires a participant society in which power is shared and authoritative decisions are made by representatives of all the citizens. Indian democracy, unfortunately, lacks the effective participation of all its citizens, (Khanna 2009: 61).

To strengthen the position of women in society equal participation of men and women is required. This is not only a demand of simple justice or democracy, but necessary condition for the human existence. The entry of the women into the politics and decision-making structures can change the policies, vision and structure of institutions. They could redefine political priorities and place new items on the political agenda to address gender specific concerns and provide a new perspective on the mainstream political issues. Women have long been overlooked in the process of development. Change can only come and development can only take place when women are given decision-making roles. It is also necessary to overcome the patriarchal orientations of society. Education, development of scientific outlook, legal safeguards, enlightenment of men and awareness of their own potential by women are the effective forces in this direction. By strengthening women's leadership, building up their self-confidence and morale and equipping them with information the situation can be changed. They should realize that they are legally at par with men and they should not be deprived of any of their rights. Their acceptance of their equality and confidence in their ability would go a long way in altering the political scenario, (Khanna 2009: 62.)

Securing the participation of women in the institutions of democracy and governance is now an important item on the global agenda. According to 2011 census, women population is 586.46 million, representing 48.46 percent of country's population of 1210.19 million. The development of women has always been the central focus in development planning, since independence. In the first twenty years, policy makers were primarily concerned with overall economic growth. The third decade of independence witnessed an increase in concerns for equity and poverty alleviation and now the empowerment in the 90s to 2000s, the Department of Women and Child Development, implementing special programmes for holistic development and empowerment of women with welfare programmes.

India has heralded the new millennium by pronouncing the year 2001 as Women's Empowerment Year. In terms of political empowerment, nearly seven lakh women occupy positions as members and chairpersons of grassroot democratic institutions in India, following the reservation clause in 73rd and 74th Amendments providing one-third seats at district, taluk, village and municipal level for women. This is for the first time in our history that an opportunity has been provided for such substantial entry of the women in public life and large numbers have come forward to tackle the challenge of the leadership at all levels of Panchayats. In fact, right from the days of freedom struggle the Indian women have been consistently encouraged to take part in the active politics. But due to the vitiated political milieu, resulting from increasing politicization and criminalization of politics, the level of political participation of women has been adversely affected despite the fact that there has been a marked increase in the level of literacy and political awareness of women. It is recognized that the goal of poverty alleviation is difficult to achieve without the role and active participation of women, who constitute a large section of the workforce in the country. Women's empowerment is critical to the process of development of the community and, therefore, bringing them into the mainstream of development has been a major concern of the government, (Pargunan 2008: 61).

In the present times there is a growing consciousness to recognize women's autonomy and their capacity to act as 'full citizens'. Their role in the social, political and economic context needs to be recognized in the right earnest and the forces that keep the women away from the mainstream need to be countered. Women can be effective change agents and important contributors to the national development. Their status can be correlated to their participating rights and obligations in managing the society. The significant indicators of the status of women in any society are political participation, representation and share in decision-making bodies. The representation of women is considered important both for normative and practical reasons. Viewed from the normative perspective, the interests of all the citizens should be represented by the political elite, (Negruşteva 2000: 125). If women are not included in the political process it may result in policies reflecting only the male perspective. Thus, practically, it may lead to the allocation of resources and decisions which may not be in the interest of women, (Connell 1990: 507).

The making of the Indian Constitution brought the women legal equality. Constitutional provisions and legislative securities subsequently led the women to leave the relative calm of private life and enter both elective and appointive public offices in unprecedented numbers. India has the distinction of having lady Prime Minister for nearly twenty years and several women Chief Ministers and governors at the state level. The reservation of 33 per cent seats for women in the Panchayats (local government) and a proposal for a similar reservation in the Parliament all raised hopes for the betterment of women. However, this was only an illusion, which camouflaged reality. In general, the involvement of women in politics has been low key. They form part of the syndrome of exclusion from political power, (Narain, Sahu and Lakshmi 2007: 7).

Traditionally, women have been volunteers in civic and social community effects, in electoral politics as political wives, party loyalists and voters. In political decision-making their status has been subordinate to that of men. Only a small section of women belongs to or supported by affluent and influential families have managed to enter the political mainstream. The Fundamental Right of Equality (enshrined in Articles 14 to 18) and equal right to vote to men and women. They cast their vote and take part in agitational political activities but lag behind in enjoying positions of power and decision making, (Kondreddy 2000: 33). This is evident in the formal political institutions at the state's and national level.

Theoretically, the low status of women has been accepted in a majority of tribal societies. But still according to Dhebar Commission Report (1961), the tribal women, in most of the cases is not a dregge or a beast of burden but exercises a firm hand in family matters. Tribal women in matriarchal and matrilineal societies are undoubtedly better off in comparison to tribal women in patriarchal and patrilineal societies. Tribal women as whole seem to enjoy comparatively more freedom and are devoid of many constraints that imposed caste on Hindu women. They might lead a very hard life as far as physical labour is concerned but they certainly enjoy more freedom than their counterparts among caste Hindus. They can roam about freely, visit markets or friends, cut jokes with men without reservations and are usually free to select their life partners. Many of them can divorce and remarry without social sanctions, (Thakur 1996: 5)

II. CONCLUSION

Participation in the political processes provides an opportunity to people to make the political system reflect their aspirations and ambitions and at the same time lends legitimacy to the system which is the hallmark of democracy. In fact no democratic polity survives or fulfills its ideals without the participation of the people. However, for a very long time, women were denied the opportunity to participate in the political process due to several historical reasons. This trend existed in most of the countries including the west. Democracy contrary to the authoritarian rule, the power in the people themselves, who in turn elect representatives by the exercising of their franchise thus, elections lie at the heart of the democratic process and are an expression of popular will. It is through the instrument of elections that notions of consent and representation are translated into reality by conversion of votes into seats in legislature. They gauge the state of the national mind and open up channels between polity and society, between elites and masses, and between individuals and the government. The equality guaranteed by the constitution of India, demands active political participation by women which is integral to the whole issue of the progress of women. Women constitute 50 percent of the rural population. This gives them the legitimacy to play an important role at the grassroots level. Women's entry in village political system can ensure change in the political system of the village, the familial and social perceptions of the role of women and development of grassroots leadership among women. At the Gram Sabha and Panchayat levels a new leadership can emerge which is expected to administer better financial resources and provide constructive thinking in village administration and its development.

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