

Women in Indian Political Process: A Review of the Nature and Course

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The growing realization is that democracy remains deficient and the political system will stay unrepresentative without the active involvement and engagement of women or one-half of the total population. The women's specific needs and requirements will remain ignored without input and assertion from women themselves. More importantly, lopsided power configurations and structural handicaps that alienate and ostracize women will continue to be entrenched unless and until women take part in the political decision-making process.

India might have enacted a host of legislations that intend to improve socioeconomic conditions as well as strengthen women's participation in the political process. However, when the participation of women is conceived in broader terms encompassing their involvement in membership of political parties, campaigning, voting, and association in elections of every possible political stratum (parliament, assembly, and panchayat) it gets very clear that participation of women is languishing and more ironically, it is decreasing when compared to their male counterpart.

This paper delineates the participation of Indian women in the election of political strata and argues that they continue to remain virtually secluded from the decision-making process. There are few women in the decision-making structure because there are few women contestants. Political parties must shun their conventional coldness if not antagonistic attitude to women and the family extends cooperative and accommodative hands so that women can acquire leadership qualities and can play a proactive role in transforming their marginalized position and status.

Key Words: Democracy, Political participation, Status of Women, Hindrances

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I. INTRODUCTION:

“As long as women of India do not take part in public life, there can be no salvation for the country” “he further added “As long as women do not come to the public life and purify, we are not likely to attain swaraj. Even if we did it would have no use for that kind of swaraj to which women have not made their contribution” Mahatma Gandhi.

It is unambiguous that for the social, economic, and political development of women it is very essential to participate in the political process. Active participation of women, the hitherto neglected segments of society can go a long way to consolidate the foundation of the liberal democratic order that India as a society is trying to consolidate. As women comprise almost half of the population hence this section requires special attention and must have adequate representation in the decision-making process. By taking an active part in the political process women can create new opportunities (from a developmental perspective) for themselves and can transform them into active agencies to fight against perpetual male domination. India might have enacted a host of legislation and policies that intend to improve socio-economic conditions as well as strengthen women's participation in the democratic process. But when the participation of women is conceived in broader terms including their involvement in political parties and elections like parliament, assembly, and panchayet it is found that even after seventy-five years of independence there is no significant change in the status of women. At the policy level, various legal reforms have also been introduced to improve the social status of the Indian social system (Mehta, 2002).

II. POLITICAL PROFILE:

The participation of Indian women in the active political process is a byproduct of their participation in the Indian freedom struggle. But their political participation remains low and never exceeded 15% of all seats. Between 1992-96 Indian women on average only 6% and 10% proportion of total seats in the lower house and upper house respectively. In assembly, they had hardly 4% representatives. In the case of panchayat and municipality, 73rd and 74th amendments were made for the inclusion of more women in decentralized

governance. But still, their representation is not adequate. Although poor participation is a universal phenomenon but compared to other developing countries India's situation is not good enough (See table –I & II)

Table –I: Representation of women in the central Council of Ministers

Year	Number of Ministers			Number of Women Ministers		
	Cabinet Minister	MOS*	Deputy Minister	Cabinet Minister	MOS*	Deputy Minister
1985	15	25	0	1	3	0
1990	17	17	5	0	1	1
1995	12	37	3	1	4	1
1996	18	21	0	0	1	0
1997	20	24	0	0	5	0
1998	21	21	0	1	3	0
2002	32	41	0	2	6	0
2003	30	48	0	1	6	0
2004	29	39	0	1	5	0
2009	40	38	0	3	4	0
2011	32	44	0	2	6	0
2012	31	43	0	2	6	0
2013	31	47	0	3	9	0
2014	23	22	0	6	1	0

Source: Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi. MOS: Minister of States *Including Minister of State with Independent

From the above picture, it is clear that the magnitude of underrepresentation is increasingly recognized as a problem. Even in more advanced and educated states like Kerala where women have the highest literacy rate (95.2%) but they do not enter public life more than others. Hence, poor representation is held to be the main reason for the small number of women in the ministries.

Table –II: Number of Electors and Percentage of Voting in Various General Elections

General election	Year	Total number of electors			Percentage of electors participating in the elections		
		Figures in Millions			Female	Male	Total
		Female	Male	Total			
1st	1952	NA	NA	173.2	NA	NA	61.2
2nd	1957	NA	NA	193.7	NA	NA	62.2
3rd	1962	102.4	113.9	216.4	46.6	62.0	55.0
4th	1967	119.4	129.6	249	55.5	66.7	61.3
5th	1971	NA	NA	274.1	NA	NA	55.3
6 th	1977	154.2	167.0	321.2	54.9	65.6	60.5
7th	1980	170.3	185.2	355.6	51.2	62.2	56.9
8th	1984	192.3	208.0	400.3	59.2	68.4	64.0
9th	1989	236.9	262.0	498.9	57.3		61.9
10th	1991	234.5	261.8	498.4	51.4	61.6	56.7
11th	1996	282.8	309.8	592.6	53.4	62.1	57.9
12th	1998	289.2	316.7	605.9	57.9	65.7	61.9
13th	1999	295.7	323.8	619.5	55.6	63.9	59.9
14th	2004	322.0	349.5	671.5	53.6	62.2	58.1
15th	2009	342.2	374.7	716.9	55.8	60.3	58.1
16th	2014	397.0	437.0	834.1	65.6	67.1	66.4

Source: Election Commission of India, New Delhi *NA: Not Available

Notes: Sex-wise breakup of electors is not available for the First, Second, and Fifth General Elections

Studies on women's participation in voting show that in exercise franchises the interest of women is growing day by day but compared to male counterparts it is not satisfactory. It should be mentioned here that increasing

participation in voting is mostly due to mobilization by political parties rather than the self-consciousness of women.

It is clear that despite involvement in the freedom movement and some other popular movements women continue to remain secluded from the decision-making process. One commentator states that 'Women seem to lose interest or be excluded, however, when politics become a single game of distributing power. CSW reasoned that the institutionalization of the political process coupled with its increasing alienation from the real social problems affecting women's lives is the reason behind women's consistent failure to find their due place in mainstream politics. Besides women continue to face various difficulties from family and society to enter into politics. There are factors like – lack of money and muscle power for contesting elections, violence, and external pressure are also contributed to their poor participation in the decision-making process.

The necessity of women's inclusion:

For inclusion of women in politics requires the identification of the existence of patriarchy in the sphere. There is a belief that politics is masculine activity and its leadership should be confined to males only. But it is true that without the share of almost half of the population democracy would be ridiculous and the political system would be vulnerable and ineffective. If policies and decisions are being taken without any consultation and opinion of women then some basic requirements like health, education, child care, etc would be neglected. If they are included in decision making they would be able to identify their need and requirement and work accordingly. In essence, the induction of women in mainstream politics may fulfill the expectations that they will assume the public role not only as the representative of the gender they belong to. It is imperative to adopt certain affirmative action's to eliminate the existing discrimination to ensure political equality as guaranteed in the constitution. Besides, political parties should come forward to increase the representation of women, and the women's reservation bill which reserves 33% of seats for Indian women in the legislature has to be passed soon in the parliament. To achieve this, women have to be more organized and indoctrinated on a gender basis and have a majority in decision-making.

III. Conclusion:

The participation and performance of women in politics and governance show that even after seventy-five years of independence they are far behind their male counterparts. The gender gap between men and women is also significant over time. One of the main reasons for this backwardness is their nonparticipation in politics and the decision-making process. Although women are trying their best to make themselves assertive in all levels of governance. However, lack of awareness, lack of education, poor socioeconomic conditions, and lack of support from family constrain them.

To bring more women to politics attention should be given to the party level because in a party-based system everything depends on parties decision. Gender stereotypes that perceive women as weak representatives should be changed and it is also important to change the mindset of society. Only legal measure is not enough to bring more women into politics and the decision-making process.

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