Political Participation of Women in India

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ABSTRACT

Gender equality is central to the realization of Millennium Development Goals. Gender equality, leading to increased work opportunities, enhanced capacities for livelihood developments, enhanced social protection and overall increasing voice may enable women to participate equally in productive employment, contributing to women's development leading to economic growth of the nation. No nation can afford development without considering women who constitute about half of the stock of human resources. The constitution of India has made provision of establishment of Local Self Governments in order to decentralize the planning process and governance. 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments Acts were introduced which made provisions for three tire system of decentralized governance. Women's role in decision making is one of the most important questions for consideration in the movement for their empowerment. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1992) to the Indian Constitution have served as a major breakthrough towards ensuring women's equal access and increased participation in political power structure. Against this backdrop, present paper purports to review the political participation of women in India.

The term political participation generally refers to those voluntary activities of members of a society, in the selection of rulers and formation of public policy. Since popular sovereignty is one of the inseparable attributes of democracy, the right to participate is an important aspect of democratic government and an inherent right in a democratic process. Political participation is a basic ingredient of every political system. Participation helps the individual to be effective and associates him with the political system. Higher the rate and levels, the more varied the forms of political participation. It is vital to the proper functioning of a democratic polity. The International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences defined political participation as the principal means by which consent is granted or withdrawn in a democracy and rulers are made accountable to the ruled (International Encyclopaedia, 1968). It signifies such proceedings like voting, seeking information, discussing and proselytizing, attending meetings, contributing financially and communicating with representatives (International Encyclopaedia, 1968).

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Many writers have rightly argued that political participation of citizens is the distinguishing mark of modern states. More than anything else, the modem state is distinguished from the traditional ones by the extent to which people participate in politics (Das, 1997). High levels of political participation are usually associated with democracy, which is beneficial both to the individual and to the society. Political participation has been considered as a 'sine qua non' of democracy (Das, 1997). Political participation has been characterized as a civic duty, as a sign of political health and the best method of ensuring that one's private interests are not neglected. Although political power in every society is monopolized by a few, the incumbents of political authority in every system are found to be quite keen on ensuring some amount of political participation by the people. Thus, by involving the many in the matters of the state, political participation fosters stability and order by reinforcing the legitimacy of political authority.

Political participation is a term that has many meanings. The term is applied to the activities of people from all levels of political system. Sometimes the tern1 is applied more too political orientations than to activities. Political participation is defined in such a way as to include the exercise of power in nongovernmental as well as government spheres. It is true that there exists a great deal of confusion with regard to what is meant by that term; "Participation may be viewed from two angles again-intensity and width. How deeply a person is involved in an issue and to what extent he would go towards achievement of this objective would determine the intensity. Width arises because of the complex nature of political activity that requires participation in different issues ranging from casting votes to participating in a technical expert committee or becoming a minister" (Sheshadri, 1976).

Political participation may be defined as those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or support government and politics (Milbrath & Goel, 197&). This definition is broader than most others, as it includes not only active roles that people pursue in order to influence political outcomes but also ceremonial and support activities. To Almond and Powel, "political participation is the involvement of the members of the society in the decision making process of the system" (Almond & Powelll, 1975). Mc Closky defines, "political participation implies those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers and directly or indirectly, in the formulation of public policy" (Dowse, 1972). Verba and Pye define it as, "Those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and the actions they take" (Verba & Nie, 1972). Political participation of elected women representatives will be measured in terms of voting, nominations for political posts in parties,

pressure groups, election fray, holding positions in political and administrative bodies or institutions, decision making process, attending meetings, raising issues and concern for development and governance.

Political participation is the hallmark of a democratic setup. Nature, success and effectiveness of democracy largely depend on the extent to which equal, effective and actual participation is provided by the system to all its citizens. As women comprise about half of the population, this section of society requires due attention in the system and a due share in process. Citizens' active participation in political affairs in a democracy is crucial and necessary because it provides legitimacy to the system and also strengthens the democratic fabric (Palmer, 1976). Democracy will fail in its objectives if women citizens lack equal opportunity to participate in the governmental decision-making process. They are to be equal partners in the nation-building and political development.

Political democracy requires at least a minimum of people's participation in the decision making process. 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 (Lipset, 1973). Norman D. Palmer defines political participation as the involvement of citizens in such political activities, which directly or indirectly influence the behaviour and actions of decision-makers (Palmer, 1976). It may be viewed as any "Voluntary action, successful or unsuccessful, organised or unorganised, episodic or continuous, employing legitimate or illegitimate methods, intended to influence the choice of public policies, the administration of public affairs, or the choices of political leaders at any level of government, local or national" (Weiner, 1976).

It may be pointed out that all citizens do not participate equally or in the same manner in any political process. The political culture of a society greatly influences the nature of political participation of individuals. The real purpose and impact of participation is to make the citizen not a passive spectator but an agent in politics, to enable him to show his disagreement as much as to endorse what is proposed, as much to scotch Initiatives as to launch them, as much to revise, criticize and block as to push, prod and hasten (Mount, 1974). However, if political participation is to have any concrete meaning, particularly in a democratic setup, people should directly or indirectly take part in the decision-making processes which affect their day to day life. Political participation of women in India is reported to be low at all levels of political and administrative institutions, however, there has been increasing trend in participation of women in local governments , both in PRIs and ULBs. This is because of the fact that one third seats of PRIs and ULBs have been reserved for women.

The conceptualization of political participation has been undergoing drastic changes. Such changes will have a direct impact upon different modes of political participation. Citizens can participate in different and alternative ways to influence the government and the: political system. Until recently most survey studies of political participation confined their enquiry to a relatively limited set of political acts. Most of them asked whether a person had voted or not and some went on to ask about such behaviour as attendance at political meetings or rallies, working for a party, making a monetary contribution or seeking a public office (Milbrath & Goel, 1977). However, these alternative ways of political participation depend on the types of citizens who participate, tile way in which they act, the amount of pressure they can to exert and the system's response towards their activities. Thus political participation is more than the vote and more than an activity in the electoral system. Verba and Nie grouped into four broad modes of participation the alternative activities by which citizens can participate in politics, i.e., voting, campaign activity, co-operative activity and citizen-initiated contact (Verba & Nie, 1972). Milbrath and Goel add protest and communication to these modes mentioned by Verba and Nie, which relate individuals to the polity. They are also of the view that political acts could be hierarchically organised from the least difficult to the most difficult, if a person performed a more diff cult act, he was likely to perform those that are less difficult as well (Milbrath & Goel, 1977).

It is useful to' consider political participation in a hierarchical sense, but it should also be born in mind that some levels of participation may be absent in some political systems (Rush & Althoff, 1971). Not all political system have elections or a form of voting, some systems severely restrict or ban public meetings and demonstrations, while others forbid the formation of political parties and other types of political or quasi-political orgnisation, and so on (Rush & Althoff, 1971). Explaining the extent of political participation Michael Rush and Philip Althoff added that apathy; alienation and the use of violence vary clearly and considerably from system to system, but remain quite important factors in any examination of political participation (Rush & Althoff, 1971).

Examining the modes of political participation Schonfeld has mentioned ten types of activities which include (I) running for or holding public or party offices, (2) belonging to a party or other political organization, (3) working in an election, (4) attending political meetings or rallies, (5) making financial contribution to a party or a candidate, (6) contacting a public official, (7) publicly expressing a political opinion to convince others, (8) partaking in political discussion, (9) voting, and (10) exposing oneself to political stimuli (Schonfeld, 1975). Political participation is the mother and politics is the child. The former creates and determines politics and hence is of utmost importance

both for the nation and the individual. The politics of the nation is determined therefore, by political participation in all its processes (Bala, 1999).

The socio-economic environment will have a direct impact upon political participation. Socio-economic variables include education, occupation, income, age, caste, religion, sex, family background, residence etc. "Political participation", says Robert Lane, "IS a function of age, sex, education and status (Lane, 1959). Thus generally, participation tends to be higher among better educated, members of higher occupational and income groups, middle aged, dominant ethnic and religious groups, people with political family background, settled residents, urban dwellers and members of voluntary associations (Closky, 1968). However, the correlation between political participation anti some of these socio-economic variables may vary from culture to culture in different political contexts and their effect on political participation may not be sable.

Ideology can affect political participation, positively or negatively. Normally, those who have firm faith in democratic ideology positively respond to political participation. On the other hand, persons having contempt for democratic ideology show little inclination for political participation. Political participation is associated with political awareness i.e., actual knowledge of political affairs. 4wareness is highly connected with interest. In every society the number of citizens who can be described as 'aware' is extremely small. Awareness affects both the quality and amount of participation (Das, 1997). It is to be noted that the three sets of variables are closely linked and intermingled. A change in any of them, can, therefore, increase or decrease the level of political participation.

Another dimension that has to be taken into account is why some people keep off from all forms of political participation or even if they participate they are ready to play only a minimal role. In other words people who participate in most forms of political activity constitute a minority and often a very small minority. The factors, which inhibit political participation, are psychological and emotional. The non-participants are described as apathetic, cynical, alienated and anemic (Roy, 1999). Apathy is characterized by individuals' passivity or abstention from political activity. It may be defined as lack of interest or concern for persons, situations or phenomena in general or particular (Das, 1997). Apathy leads to the decline of political vitality and vigilance widespread apathy increases the chances of opportunists and unscrupulous people to dominate the policy making process (Das, 1997). Thus it is nothing other than lack of interest in politics.

Morris Rosenberg has suggested three major reasons for political apathy. The first reason is perceived consequence of political activity. Second reason

is that the individual may regard political activity as futile. The third reason is that political stimuli is an important factor in encouraging political activity and the absence of such stimuli may contribute to feelings of apathy (Roy, 1999). Cynicism is a feeling that the actions and motives of others are to be regarded with suspicion. Robert Auger and his colleagues define cynicism as being contemptuously distrustful of human nature (Roy, 1999). It is observed that a person, who is extremely cynical may well feel that political participation in any form is futile and thus join the ranks of the totally apathetic (Roy, 1999). Alienation is another form of non- participation with respect to a political system. While cynicism refers to a type of distaste for politics and politicians, alienation denotes actual hostility (Das, 1997). Robert Lane defines political alienation as a "person's sense of estrangement fi.om the politics and government of his society and the tendency to think of the government and politics of the nation as run by others for others according to an unfair set of rules (Roy, 1999). According to Robert Lane anemic refers to "a sense of value loss and lack of direction" (Roy, 1999). It denotes a psychological attitude in which the individual experiences a feeling of ineffectiveness. Thus while apathy means lack of interest and cynicism represents an attitude of distaste or disenchantment, both alienation and anemic imply a feeling of estrangement or divorce from the society (Roy, 1999).

Participation of women in Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local governments has been an area of much interest in India. Participation in the local government institutions has been viewed as essential in promoting women's consciousness and development at the local level as well as in training them for participation in the wider politics. Democratic thinkers haven general linked liberty to the people by the process of political participation. Participation is maximized in local government because, "local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they put it within people's reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it (de Tocqueville, 1966). Karl Mam stood in favour of mass involvement in the process. To hire political participation by the masses is at once a process of education and of building up of a capacity for governing the new society (Sheshadri, 1976). It is a fact that woman herself is an important variable capable of determining the nature and scope of political participation and as a result the whole political system in turn.

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 (Kumar, 2000). It is not an argument for feminism. "Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of colour, working class women" (Smith, 1982). Milbrath and Goel observed that it is a tradition in almost all societies that politics is mainly an affair of men and that women should fall in line with them politically. The changes brought by modern industrial societies are eroding this sex difference but the impact of tradition is still visible. Men tend to be more psychologically involved in politics than women (Milbrath & Goel, 1977). Studies on sex differences in the political behaviour usually focus on differences in early childhood socialization. Tedin, et.al, however, give more importance to situational factors in sex related differences in political expressiveness than to socialization or structural factor women are less politically expressive because the environment of the house wife or the menial sort of employment available to most women does not encourage them to take part in politics or give stimulation to collect and discuss politically relevant information. Female situational factors, which lead to less political expressiveness become institutionalized and passed on to future generations through the socialization process, which in turn makes it more difficult for women to overcome situational disadvantages (Teden, *et al*. 1977).

In India, there is a continued dominance of the upper class in education, administration and structures of government. The eighty-fourth constitution Amendment Bill meant to provide one-third reservation of seats to women in states and central legislative bodies and the controversies around it mirror the contradictions of Indian society (Raman, 2002). The protagonists of the Bill highlight the traditionally sanctioned exclusion of women from the public sphere as crucial. Undoubtedly, women's suppression, in history, has been very important in maintaining upper-class exclusivity and hegemony. Affirmative action for women would certainly play a role in undermining male and upper-caste dominance. There is also a strong resistance on the part of a considerable number of political leaders to 'encroachments' into what has been a traditionally male preserve. The media has characterized the debate as a battle between 'feminists' and 'casteists' (Raman, 2002). In India, the 73rd and 74th amendments passed in 1992 have been instrumental in ensuring a strong representation of women in local government institutions for women in local government and the provision for one third chair persons to be from among the women but there is no reservation of seats for women either in the State Legislative Assembly nor in parliament at the national level. The demand for reservation in the parliament by women's groups has raised many eyebrows and severe criticism. Many times the bill was taken in parliament but failed. Women activists wanted to get this bill passed before the elections to the state assemblies and parliament to be held by the end of

2008. At least once a year a few members of parliament debate the need to reserve 33 percent of seats for women. The bill comes up when the parliament convenes but soon gets shelved with all the ensuing acrimony (Times of India: 2008).

Political participation of women has gained momentum in India as gender mainstreaming in political institutions has been supported by political activists. The role of women in freedom struggle and feminist movement has been significant however; their representation in political institutions and decision making process is still to be low. Their representation in Parliament and state legislatures is reported less than 10 per cent which is much low as compared to the most of the Muslim countries. Women's share in local governments has no doubt has increased significantly due to the process of decentralization and reservation provided to them. However, their share in higher level political institutions and decision making bodies is still low. The recent debate for the reservation of seats for women in legislative bodies has no doubt created political conscious among the political activists for providing increased opportunities for women in political institutions and decision making bodies. However, most of the political parties and leaders are still in doldrums for providing quota to women for their political empowerment. Though women representation in local governments has significantly increased in post 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts , however, their political participation is still low . The proposed study will be helpful in understanding the dynamics of political participation of women, background characteristics of elected women representatives in local governments, their participation in governance and suggest road m The Constitutional Amendment Acts also ensured the provision of reservation of women in local governments. One-third seats were reserved in urban local bodies also. A few states such as Bihar, M.P., and Rajasthan have also made provision for 50 per cent reservation for women in local governments. Thus the gender mainstreaming in decentralized governance has been initiated. More ever, women's share in policy perspective and resources allocation in urban sector has been reported to be very low. With the launch of JNNURM and other infrastructure programmes and schemes, gender mainstreaming is getting momentum. JNNURM and reforms agenda seek to improve the effectiveness, accountability, efficiency, sustainability and service equity in cities. It also aims to reduce class and gender fragmentation by making socio-political-economic institutions, processes and resource allocations more equitable. Thus, gender based urban development is about promoting cities that respond, equally to men and women. Urban women experience cities differently and thus meeting their needs becomes critical for promoting sustainable and equitable urban development (Singh, 2013).

The 74th Amendment to the Indian Constitution, 1992 has served as a major breakthrough towards women's equal access and increased participation in local government. The Constitutional Amendment Act aims at constitutional guarantees to safeguard the interests of urban local government to enable them to function as effective and self governing institutions at grassroot level. This Amendment provides for reservation of 33 percent of elected seats for women at local government level in urban areas. There is also one-third reservation for women of posts of chairpersons for these local bodies. Involvement of women in the political arena and in decision making process is an important tool for empowerment as well as monitoring standards of political performance at local level. However, some of the major constraints prevent women from effective participation at local level.

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