Women’s Empowerment: Representation on Political Aspect

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Abstract — In this paper, the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, Plans and programmes have aimed at women’s advancement in different spheres. From the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) onwards has been a marked shift in the approach to women’s issues from welfare to development. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women. The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels. This paper will focus on political empowerment for women as a key driver for economic and social empowerment. The recent Constitutional amendments (73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments) brought about significant changes in the political scenario of the country with regard to women’s participation in politics. However, in India, attempts to secure political representation in higher political arenas have not been successful. Fresh impetus is required with a modern approach. Indian democracy is 60 years old now, yet the participation of women in politics has actually declined since the days of the freedom movement, both in quantity and quality. Therefore, in this paper attempt will be made to highlight the arrangements made at the political level for empowering women and the accountability of the policy makers to achieve the same. We don’t yet fully appreciate equal participation of women alongside men as in India men are schooled to behave in the way they do owing to their patriarchal training. Even in bureaucracy, we see a blatant display of gender discrimination. The political parties, too, would not concede to a 33% women’s quota in parliament. Women’s empowerment should be seen from a broader angle, now that many new avenues are opening up for competent women, for instance women have already made their mark in the field of media, corporate world, armed forces, police and sports. Of late IT industry has also brought a radical change in employing an increasing proportion of women in software and related areas.

Keyword — Preamble, Amendment, Instance, Corporate, Bureaucracy.

INTRODUCTION

India got Independence on 15th August 1947. After Independence its constitution become operative on 26th January 1950, thus making it a sovereign Democratic Republic State. In the constitution, the provision of adult franchise was made irrespective of the caste, creed and sex. In other words every Indian who attains the age of 21 years was eligible to participate in the democratic process, which began in free - India. The universal adult franchise is the spirit of democracy. Prior to independence the election of constituent assembly was based upon restricted franchise. It was not a truly representative body. The seats were distributed among the provinces and states on the basis of their population; one member was elected for a million of population. The seats allocated to the various provinces were to be divided into three sections - General, Muslims and Sikhs. The Constituent Assembly was consisting of 389 members. Out of these 292 seats were allotted to the British Indian Provinces (Genera 210, Muslims 78 and Sikhs 4). Whereas 93 seats, were allotted to the states, three seats were allotted to the Chief Commissioner’s provinces and one to British Baluchistan. The representatives of the states were to be elected in accordance with the system to be settled by negotiation, while the members of provinces were to be elected by the Legislative Assemblies of the respective provinces on the basis of single transferable vote. The elections to the constituent assembly were held in July 1946. Out of the 210 General seats congress won 199 seats. Out of the 78 seats reserved for Muslims, the Muslim League secured 73 seats.

The representative of the princely states came to be associated with the constituent assembly at a later date after the merger of the states with the Indian Union. It may be observed that the representatives of the states joined at different stages. For example eight Princely States sent their representatives to the assembly on 28th April 1947. Further between December 1946 and November 1949 a number of small states either merged in the provinces or united to form bigger states. As a result of these developments the numerical strength of the constituent assembly continued to fluctuate before it finally settled down to 324. 235 representing the British India and 89 representing the Indian States as against 389 suggested by the Cabinet Mission Plan (296 for British India and 93 for the Indian States) Hyderabad, a princely state, which was allotted 16 seats in the constituted assembly, did not send its representative to the Constituent Assembly at all. Thus constituent assembly was not a sovereign body. Not only it was set up by the British Government, but it could also abolish it. Its authority was also limited.

After independence it was thought that the participation and involvement of Indian people is necessary in the process of nation building and implementation of democratic norms in the Indian political systems. It was also the objective of ruling elites to involve each section of society to provide social justice. The oppressed section of the society particularly scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and women were to be given fair opportunities to bring
them in the national main stream by providing them proper opportunities in the process of nation building. The programme of community development was introduced in 1952 which, was aimed at rural development. After independence, the major task with the Indian political elites was to raise the level of literacy, economic development and all round development in social and economic life of the masses. The planned economy was also one of the objectives of introducing Five Year Plans in independence Indian. Since Major chunk of the population was in the rural India and this section of the society was engaged in agricultural related activities, the main thrust of Five Year Plans was to boost agriculture and cottage industry. In the beginning of sixties there was severe shortage of food - grains in India. Hence, in this period the main thrust of the government was to improve agriculture in the country. However, it was also felt that unless and until the masses are involved in the rural development and democratic process the objective of democracy would not be achieved. In order to achieve these targets committee under the chairmanship of Balwant Rai Mehta was constituted which submitted its report in 1957. The committee was of the opinion that unless and until the democracy is decentralized and the involvement of common masses is ensured, the objective of democracy would not be achieved. Although Balwant Rai Mehta committee report is considered as a historic document in the history of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India yet, it failed to recommend reservation of seats to the women in proportion to their population in India. It appears the committee did not feel it necessary to provide equal status to the women at the lowest level in the democratic process. Thereafter, individual states took some initiatives to provide reservation to the women, but the government of India took no concrete steps in this regard. The various committees for example Ashok Mehta Committee, 1978, G.V.K. Rao Committee, 1985 and L.M. Singhvi Committee, 1986 also failed to visualize this aspect. At last the 73rd amendment of the constitution was the only historic step in providing 33 percent reservation for the women in the grassroots institutions. Although later on 81st constitutional amendment was introduced in Parliament to provide reserved seats for the women, but it is still gathering dust in the parliament. The agenda's of every political party clearly laid down the issue of women reservation in the state legislative assemblies and in the parliament but, when the question of distribution of tickets comes, no political party is sincere in providing proper representation to the female sex in the Parliament, assembly and in the Organisation of the party. The ultimate result is the discrimination to the female sex in the democratic process. The various commissions, organisations and committees constituted for the welfare and development of women, failed to give them a proper status in the Indian political system. The various studies relating to women empowerment has revealed the grim scenario of women's participation. It appears the political elites sitting at the helm of the affairs are not sincere in implementing the provisions of constitution in an earnest manner. When ever, the parliament is in session, the issue of women reservation figures in the last days of session. Recently, the women members of Parliament make hue and cry to table the women reservation bill in the parliament but some political parties were opposed to it tooth and nail in the present reform of the bill. Majority of the high level political elites were apprehending threat to their existence if the amendment is passed in the present form.

The 73rd constitutional amendment which was passed in 1992 was a step to involve women in the working of grassroots institutions. The twin objective of democratic decentralization was to involve the masses in the rural development programmes and devolution of powers to the grassroots institutions and to make them unit of self-government. Self-governance has been achieved to some extent by constitutional 73rd amendment in providing representation to all the sections of the society which were hither to remain neglected in the democratic process. The various provisions with regard to reservation to SCs, STs, OBCs and women in the democratic decentralization process have done great justice to the deprived sections of the society. However, 33 percent reservation to the women is again a discriminatory step as the female sex constitute almost little less than half of the population of the country, while they have been provided only 33 percent reservation, but it can be accepted as a good gesture and a well begin by providing reservation to the women in the 73rd amendment of the constitution. The age old mentality of men with regard to women is a big hurdle in the discharge of their role in the grassroots institutions. The various studies relating to women empowerment and women participation reveal that women are facing various problems in the discharge of their duties. In a male dominated society, custom ridden society, literacy and backwardness in the social sphere have contributed towards this kind of role to women in the grassroots institutions. In most of the cases women have become a rubber stamp of their husbands in the discharge of their duties. The studies also reveal that women face difficulties from their male counterparts in the discharge of their duties, at the same time, there are number of other difficulties being faced by women as chairperson of grassroots institutions dealing with bureaucracy. The family responsibilities and social backwardness are some of the hurdles in proper functioning of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Women leadership is playing a very important role in the Panchayati Raj Institutions after 1992. It is through the leaders, the wishes and aspirations of the rural people are met. In this sense they are the eyes and ears of the rural people. It means they participate
in elections on the wish of their husbands and other male members. Thus, the effective functioning of PRIs depends mainly on the quality of leadership available at the grassroots levels. Moreover, it is widely believed that leadership plays a significant role in promoting political development and democratic growth. Panchayati Raj is regarded as the heart and soul of Indian democracy. The health and strength of India democracy is depends on its functioning. It is an agency of social progress, economic prosperity and political development.

The history of the movement for empowering women’s status all over the world and specially in India shows emphases from the beginning on education as the most significant instrument for changing women’s position in society, education for women was regarded as a means to improve their status. The reservation policy has opened the gates of employment to scheduled caste men as well as women. But few people are not aware of their rights. The 73rd constitutional amendment act 1992 is a step towards this direction, as it provides that not less than one third of the elected members will be women. This is a land-mark in the history of women empowerment in decision making in the politics process of the country. The 73rd amendment can be considered as the greatest event for women empowerment.

Political status of women can be defined as the degree of equality and freedom enjoyed by women in the shaping of power and in the value given by society to this role of women.

It is worthwhile to note that the analysis of demographic, socio-economic and political factors like age, caste, occupation, education and income, etc. in relation to leadership are important in determining the nature of women leadership.

Today India is undergoing demographic change in every spheres and women life is being altered in important respects. Many Indian women are playing a major role in effecting these changes. They are active in politics, the professions and virtually all of the various occupation millions are seeking higher education and millions are more employed in jobs outside their homes. Spheres of activities are widening most especially for women who live in urban areas.

However, the vast majority of India’s women dwell in villages, where most carry out traditional domestic and agricultural tasks and adhere to worms which have been espoused many questions. Even in rapidly growing urban areas traditional roles and values relating women find wide acceptance.

If women are not mature age wise or they are financially weak or are not well educated they cannot prove their selves as effective leaders and it will affect the efficiency of the institutions they are working in.

Secondly, institution of marriage also plays an important role in the women politics. Women in India are dependent on the male community for all kinds of help. In this way their decision are not their own. Their coming forth and going back n operated by the source upon which they are dependent. But after 73rd amendment of the constitution the role of women leadership has changed to a greater extent. New women community has been coming to the forefront with the men.

Participation of women in every field is very significant because women constitute half of the population. Empowering women is one of the major issue of Indian politics and society of today. Panchayati Raj is a large unit of institutional arrangement through which beginning can be made. This institution has been visualized from various perspectives. Barring a few politicians, administrative thinkers and academicians considered it as an administrative reform which provides some basic goods to the rural people.

According to feminist literature politics is important for increased quality between the sexes. However, politics at every level of participation was considered to be the province of men, women have not been regarded as part of the politics until recent times. The reason given by the social scientists are the women’s disinterestedness in politics, originating in their early socialization, their in capabilities, which precluded political activity. This view overlooks the fact of women participation in large number in the political movements.

The constitutional 73rd amendment provided a new lease of life to the grassroot institutions in India by providing ignored sections of the society. The amendment was mandatory for all the states to constitute three tier grass root institutions. It was the maiden attempt to involve women in the democratic process under which 33% of the seats were reserved to the women in the Panchayati Raj institutions which is called the hub of democratic political system. There was a general opinion that with the enforcement of constitutional amendment and the provincial acts there will provide full vibrancy in the whole system of democratic decentralisation. For the success of grassroots institutions more than the cooperation of the state government and the central government, official of the governments, people’s awareness about the new system and their active participation in taking responsibility is the need of the hour.

Although the reservation to women under the constitutional 73rd amendment was a major step toward participation and involvement of women in the democratic process yet the expected results are not coming because of our social taboos, second grade to the women in the society and economic dependence on the male. However, it cannot be denied that
beginning of women participation under the 73rd amendment was a major step to involve women in the
democratic process who were denied this opportunity
up till now. So it can be considered a historical
decision by the Narasimha Rao govt.

Bureaucratic problem is also one of the problems
which come in the way of women empowerment.
Bureaucracy is the hub of the democratic system. It
plays an important role in the democratic process. It
implements the policies and decisions but the
implementation exclusively depends upon the
bureaucratic structures. The bureaucracy which is
attached with Panchayati Raj Institutions basically
belongs to other departments of the State Government.
For example, Junior Engineer either belongs to
H.P.P.W.D or H.P. Irrigation and Health Department.
Similarily, agriculture or horticulture inspector belongs
to agriculture or horticulture department. It was
observed that the different categories of employees
which were working in the Panchayat Raj Institutions
were not answerable to these institutions. The service
conditions of such employees were governed by the
respective departments. It is felt that Panchayati Raj
Institutions should have their own independent
bureaucracy which should be answerable to these
institutions.

In a hierarchical and stratified male dominated Hindu
Society, the empowerment of women through
legislation constitutes a radical break from its
historical past which was characterized by unequal
and discriminatory gender relations. It also provides
for induced empowerment of women through
enforced participation in power along with male
members. They asked to occupy and own the new
political space. However, due to lack of literacy and
political awareness, women candidates have been
pushed into elections as “dominance” and
“mouthpieces” of male members. This constitutes the
negative feature of women’s empowerment. Marriage
and family bondages, caste and kinship ties and above
all patriarchal values manifest itself by male assertion
and superiority have been pressed into service to
usurp ad deprive women of their rightful place in
PRIs”.

The real empowerment works only in ambience of
equal distribution of assets between males and
females in all spheres of private and public life. The
genuine empowerment of women is realized through
“politics of struggle” and not “politics of reservation”.
Empowerment by reservation buttered with the help of N.G.Os and the state may act as specific against
women’s struggle against the state and society and
typify the project of gender discrimination and
inequality. Before entrusting elected women
representatives with the work of rural development, it
becomes necessary to first introduce innovative
schemes for the development of their human potential.
Their internal personality tracts like attitude
awareness etc. are to be harnessed in tune with the
desired aims and objectives of Panchayats. The large
number of women is illiterate, ignorant and poorly
informed about ongoing debates and reforms and
issue affecting their lives. Most of the time, the
elected women representatives are not aware of their
role in the political process. They themselves are not
clear about what the electorate expects from them.
Even in the decision-making process the elected
women representatives were not conversant with the
members of the organizations. They are unable to take
their independent decisions. Another hurdle in the
way of effective participation of women is that
women are not economically empowered. Mostly
women are from the economically vulnerable sections
society and they cannot give up their livelihood
activities to attend this work. Political empowerment
has little meaning unless women are economically
empowered. Also they should be given legal and
police support to use the power which has been
bestowed on them without fear as inhibition. As of
now; a large number of women in Panchayats only
have cosmetic visibility and no real powers.

Participation is considered a voluntary contribution by
the people is one or another of the public programmes
supposed to contribute to national development but
the people are not expected to take part in shaping the
programme or criticizing its contents. For the
successful working of the PRs, women participation
is considered very important an effort is always made
to educate the women for their full participation and
an active involvement. So, women participation of
PRs is an important yardstick.

It has been observed that younger strata are more
active in the working of Panchayati Raj Institutions
rather than elderly people. The involvement and
participation of the younger strata in PRIs has been
increased due to education and awareness.

Education is very important for human being.
Education standard in rural areas particularly of
women is still requiring to be improved and they were
interested to teach their children. The 73rd
Constitutional Amendment has provided opportunities
to a large number of women to enter the political
decision-making process, by providing them 33
percent reservation. But 33 percent reservation was
given without keeping in view the ratio of female in
the general population.

In our society women have no economic
independence mainly due to illiteracy and ignorance.
They are depend on depend on their husband or on
other male member of the family for their economic
needs. This obstructs women to take active part in the
political arena of the country. Thus, in order to make
women an active participant in politics, economic
status of women must be enhanced by providing equal
opportunity to women.
Women face discrimination from the society right from their childhood. They have to depend on father in their childhood and later on their husbands. They never took independent decision. Women also have to face problems form the society and society has fixed roles for man and women to play. Man the earner of daily bread, while women the worker of household activities. Social taboos and customs never allow woman to cut across its bondages and held responsible position in the society.

CONCLUSIONS

In order to ensure maximum participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, stress should be laid on increasing their rate of literacy. This will help the women in understanding the political system that work at grassroots level. The women will be better informed about their rights and duties in any political system. This can also make them effective in communication with other people and can thus ultimately help them in putting their best while participating in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The bureaucracy is the hub of the democratic system. It plays an important role in the democratic process. It implements the policies and programmes of elected representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions. But their undue interference in the working of the Panchayati Raj Institutions must be restricted to the implementation level.

The political parties directly or indirectly are participating in the elections of Panchayati Raj Institution, particularly in the election of the chairpersons at the level of Panchayati Raj Institution particularly in the elections of chairpersons at the level of Panchayat Smiti and Zila Parishad. In most of the cases chairpersons could not be elected for month together due to party politics. Thus, the parties should not be allowed to dominate the grassroots level politics.

A large number of women are ignorant and poorly informed about policies and programmes. Thus, in order to empower them literacy rate of women must be increased. Women representatives in particular and common women in general must be educated in such a manner so that their participation and involvement can be ensured.

It is alleged that the funds to the Panchayati Raj Institution are allocated on political considerations by the state government. These should be fair methods of funds allocation to PRIs. In short unless and until these institutions are financially strengthened their functioning cannot be improved.

Bureaucracy should work for Panchayati Raj Institution. It should be helpful in implementing the various developing schemes of the elected representatives of the PRIs. The need for competent bureaucracy has been recognized in all the states for the inception of Panchayati Raj Institution. Even under the local bodies earlier there were adequate staffs to implant their programmes. As Panchayati Raj Institution has to plan and implement several development programmes many of which are of technical nature, they need the expertise of bureaucracy. Further a certain amount of continuity has to be maintained in the programmes and policies of Panchayati Raj bodies which would not e possible in the absence of a bureaucracy. Thus, bureaucracy should work for Panchayati Raj Institution. It should be helpful in implementing the various developing scheme. The bureaucracy should be the subservient of the elected representative which is the spirit of the democracy.

REFERENCES


