

Political Participation of Women in India: A Key to Women Empowerment

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ABSTRACT:

Democracy implies equality for all human persons, men and women, against this notion of democracy women are excluded from different walks of life, especially from politics. The U.N. observes that women constitute “world’s largest excluded category”. In the struggle for gender justice, political participation constitutes the first step. Equal treatment to women in political life should start from grassroots level which provide training in decision-making process. Political participation may be restricted by natural and man-made factors, while it is impossible to overcome natural inequalities, it is possible to overcome man-made inequalities by adopting democratic principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and justice. Mahatma Gandhi declared in 1925” As long as women of India don’t take part in public life, there can be no salvation for the country and we are not likely to attain swaraj, ever if we did it would have no use for that kind of swaraj to which women have not made their full contribution.

KEY WORDS: political participation meaning; variables; status of women; representation; corrective measures; findings and recommendations

INTRODUCTION: Politics decides destiny of people and therefore active participation of

people in political activities is extremely essential especially in democratic countries where the Government is run for the people, of the people and by the people. Popular opinion is the sole deciding factor in the formation of any national policy of the Government. Therefore all segments of people, be they in majority or in minority with their divergent views, interests and attitudes should be given representation in formulation of national policies. Political participation refers to acts not empowered to make decisions but acts which influence the behavior of those who have such decisional powers. Political participation means voting, attending party meetings, campaigning, supporting pressure groups, active membership of a political party, holding party offices, contesting elections, raising party funds and communicating directly with legislators. Limiting political participation to those activities that influence decision-making limits the participation of Indian women in the political process. Women are left on the periphery of the political process and remains elusive inspire of the voting rights. Democracy is a pre-requisite for attaining maximum extent of participation and empowerment. Empowerment is not power to dominate but rather power to act with others to effect change. Political participation is a major component of empowerment.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: MEANING

Political participation refers to those voluntary activities of members of society, which leads to selection of rulers and formation of public policy. 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 proper functioning of democratic polity. The International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences defined political participation as principal means by which consent is granted or withdrawn in a democracy and rulers are made accountable to the ruled. It implies voting, seeking information, discussing and proselytizing, attending meetings, contributing financially and communicating with representatives. The modern state is distinguished from the traditional ones by the extent to which people participate in politics. Political participation is a civic duty, a sign of political health and the best method of ensuring one's private interests. participation may be viewed from angles of intensity and width.

Panchayat Raj is an important conduit in independent India of popular participation in democratic development. It is envisaged not only for implementation of rural development policies and disbursement of development benefits but it also serves as a training ground for increasing people's political consciousness, awareness and participation in self-rule. Thus, political participation is a voluntary action, successful or unsuccessful, organized or unorganized, 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.

As women comprise about half of the population, this section of society requires due attention in the system and a due share in the process to provide legitimacy to the system and also strengthen the democratic fabric. They are to be equal partners in nation-building and political development. The political culture of a society greatly influences the nature of political participation of individuals. It should make the citizen not a passive spectator but an agent of 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. People should directly or indirectly take part in the decision-making processes which affect their day to day life.

VARIABLES OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION:

Political Participation depends on:

Psychological Environment: Political participation meets one's psychological needs of overcoming loneliness. Psychological attachment of a person towards political objects determines the extent and gravity of political participation. In every society there are such persons who are interested in political affairs and at the same time such persons who have no concern for political affairs. Men are psychologically more involved than women in politics

Socio-Economic Environment: socio-economic variables include education, occupation, income, age, caste, religion, sex, family background,

residence etc. Generally participation tends to be higher among better educated, members of high income group, middle aged, dominant ethnic and religious groups, people with political family background, settled residents, urban dwellers and members of voluntary associations. However the co-relation between political participation and some of these socio-economic variables may vary from culture to culture.

Political Environment: The political environment refers to the nature of the party system, the electoral system, the means of propaganda and campaign, the extent of modernization and urbanization, the influence of ideology and general awareness of the people. The party resembles the nation both in its symbolic force and in its capacity for arousing affection, devotion, sacrifice, feeling of belongingness, activeness in political discussions and work on the part of its members and sympathizers. People who are affiliated to a party vote more frequently than those who are not.

The campaign has its effect on polarizing party attachments, reinforcing candidate preferences and gaining votes, it is infact a process of political education. In the traditional society government and politics are concerns of a narrow elite.

Urbanisation combined with other component process of social modernization would bind the citizens with new ties to the nation state and increase the extent of political communication that leads to greater political awareness. Those who have firm faith in democratic ideology, respond positively to political participation and those who have contempt for democratic

ideology show little inclination for political participation.

Political participation is associated with political awareness. Political Awareness is highly connected with interest in politics. Awareness affects both quality and amount of participation. The three sets of variables are intermingled . a change in any one of them, can increase or decrease the level of political participation.

The Non-Participants: The people who participate in most forms of political activity constitute a very small minority. Psychological and emotional factors inhibit political participation. The non-participants are described as apathetic, cynical, alienated and anaemic. Apathy is individuals passivity or abstention from political activity, lack of interest or concern for persons , situations or phenomenon in general or particular. It leads to decline of political vitality and vigilance. Widespread apathy increases the chances of opportunists and unscrupulous people to dominate the policy-making process. Three major reasons for political apathy are perceived consequence of political activity, the futility of political activity and absence of political stimuli.

Cynicism is a feeling in which actions and motives of others are to be regarded with suspicion. A cynical person may feel that political participation in any form is futile and may join the ranks of totally apathetic.

Political alienation is a person's sense of estrangement from the politics and government of his society and to think of the politics and government of the nation as run by others and for others according to an unfair set of rules.

Anaemic refers to a sense of value loss and lack of direction. It denotes a psychological attitude in which the individual experiences a feeling of ineffectiveness. Thus while apathy means lack of interest and cynicism an attitude of distaste and disenchantment, both alienation and anaemic imply a feeling of estrangement or divorce from the society.

WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION:

It is a tradition in almost all societies that politics is mainly an affair of men and women should fall in line with them. The changes brought by modern industrial societies are eroding this sex difference but the impact of tradition is still visible. Studies on sex differences in the political behaviour usually focus on differences in early childhood socialization. Women don't get stimuli 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.

The United Nations Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women which is considered as the Human Rights Bill of Women (CEDAW) came into being in 1979. This treaty upholds (i) their right to vote in all general elections and referendums and to be elected to general assemblies, (ii) their right to participate in the formulation and implementation of governmental policies and to hold public offices and (iii) their right to participate in non-governmental and socio-political organizations. Discrimination against

women is deep-rooted in sexual division of labour which restricted females to domestic sphere of life. Substantial social changes capable of demolishing the traditional views of male and female roles is necessary to modify the trends of political participation of men and women.

Political participation is affected by social structure, economic development and historical factors joining together. The political behaviour of Muslim women should be understood in the Islamic perspective. Islam has given equal status in matters of religion and religious observations to men and women but politically they are unequal ones. Lack of female participation in politics stems from factors such as children at home, fear of sex discrimination and perception of women that certain things are not proper to do.

The generally accepted sex role socialization process is considered to be advantageous to males in the field of political participation although women may be interested in politics. But political participation of women is 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 wider socio-political problems. When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted on 10th December, 1948, its Article 1, proclaimed that, "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". Article 2 provided for equality of sexes. It states that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms without distinction of sex. It is not an argument for feminism.

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-narishwar”. On the other hand according to UNICEF’s recent international report” The Progress Of Nations 1997” more than 5000 dowry deaths occur every year in India. Woman’s lives in India and the world over are circumscribed by what can be termed as five P’s, Patriarchy, Productive resources access inadequacy, Poverty, Promotion advancement insufficiency and Powerlessness. It is estimated that women do two-third of the world’s work. In exchange they receive only 10% of all the income and own a mere 1% of all the world’s means of production. The status of a person is a great force in participating whole-heartedly 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.

WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA:

Rig-vedic women played a key role, in the family, in the society and even in the political life. They enjoyed a position of equality and were respected both in family and society. They were not ornamental objects but were co-partners in life, in its pleasures and hurdles, in its joys and sorrows. They were in parted education like men and enjoyed considerable freedom in their personal matters. Women actively participated in deliberations of Vidhata (the earliest folk assembly of Indo-Aryans) and Sabha along with men.

WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL INDIA:

During Medieval Period, the position and status of women declined as women were considered weak. Since they were sensitive in temperament, they should be treated with love and care. They were considered dependent on men throughout their lives. In childhood the father looks after her, in youth the husband and in old age her sons supported her. Therefore all her life she had to depend on someone and never enjoyed unrestrained freedom. During this period, there emerged social evils like female infanticide, child marriage and practice of sati in the Hindu society which led to deterioration of status of women both in family and society. At the same time beginning of Sikhism provided a healing touch to the degradation of women. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh religion wanted women to be treated by men as equals. However the only function of women at that time was bearing and rearing children. They were confined to the four walls of their homes, leading an ignorant and illiterate life.

WOMEN DURING REFORM MOVEMENTS:

The disintegration of the Mughal Empire in the 18th century and the consequent political anarchy added to the miseries of Indian women. When the British rule started their position was the worst in the history of the country. She was kept in a state of utter subjugation, denied any right, totally suppressed and oppressed. The customs of polygamy, the purdha, the denial of women’s rights over property, child marriage, sati and ban on remarriage to widows resulted in a weak personality of women. The close contacts with western cultural traditions, literature and education affected the minds of Indian leaders

positively. Consequently, a number of reform movements emerged. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chand VidhyaSagar, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekanand, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawahar Lal Nehru and others felt that social evils can be eradicated by raising consciousness and making people sensitive to the injustice perpetrated on women. Establishment of National Social Conference in 1887 provided a forum for the reformers to discuss practices which need to be reformed. Raja Ram Mohan Roy is rightly called the Father of Indian Renaissance. Institutions like Arya Samaj, Rama Krishna Mission, the Prarthana Samaj etc encouraged social service and educational reforms favouring women's upliftment.

The struggle for emancipation of women concentrated on social reforms, their education and their fundamental political rights. Attention was concentrated on first two in the 19th and early 20th centuries while political rights of women got attention only during the last phase of independence movement. With the beginning of 20th century, a number of high caste or elite women organizations such as The All India Women's Conference, The National Council for Women, Women's Indian Association of Madras etc. came into existence.

WOMEN IN NATIONAL MOVEMENT:

Mahatma Gandhi recognized the importance of women participation in freedom struggle as in non-violent struggle, women are in anyway superior to men in religious devotion, sacrifice, silent and dignified service. When she does anything in right spirit, she moves mountains. In the Non-Co-operation Movement of 1921 and

Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 women organized themselves into groups and were willing to join processions, face police firing and go to prison. They broke the salt law, picketed shops selling liquor and boycotted foreign manufactured cloths. There were also women who joined terrorist groups and helped in editing and distributing banned newspapers and even manufacturing bombs.

Gandhiji had immense faith in women's inner strength and moral appeal. The Independence Movement brought two streams of politically involved womenfolk together, the elite and the masses. Mahatma Gandhi encouraged women to participate in constructive programme and non-violent Satyagraha for it required not physical strength but moral courage and spiritual determination. Thus, Nationalist Movement was a means of rejuvenating and regenerating the society. The massive involvement of women in freedom struggle resulted in transformation of women's position in the eyes of the society. By the time of independence women from all sections of society had become active in politics. Direct political participation promoted women's confidence and self-reliance and broke the barriers of public and private dichotomies in their lives. The 19th century reformers improved women's status through education, remarriage of widows, restriction on child marriages and property rights to Hindu Widows but they saw women as custodians of family, responsible for the well being of children and inculcating in them the cultural values and heritage of the Indian civilization.

WOMEN IN POST INDEPENDENT INDIA:

The Constitution of India guarantees equality before law and equal protection of law to all its citizens. Article 15 of the Constitution of India prohibits discrimination on the ground of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. It also guarantees adult franchise and provides the framework for women to participate actively in politics. But it is ironical that women have not gained substantially from such provisions of the Constitution. Today women in india have made major inroads in various male dominated professions like civil services, business, medicine, engineering, law, art and culture but they have failed to gain substantive ground in the field of politics.

According to the data released by Geneva based Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU), with only 10.8% of women representation in the Lok Sabha and 9% in the Rajya Sabha, india ranks 99 in the world in terms of level of political participation by women.

Various factors like economic dependency , illiteracy, low level of public empowerment of women at all levels have discouraged women to participate in the political process. On the other hand political parties are interested only in the female vote-bank. They are not interested in promoting female members in the party beyond a certain limit so that men could hold maximum number of important positions within the party. Without proper representation of women at top decision-making executive bodies, issues concerning women would remain neglected and would not have any multiplier effect. In india, gender discrimination has sidelined even veteran woman politicians. It is difficult for women to

establish a foothold in the party without the support of powerful men, that too through close personal relations, as wives, daughters and sisters. Level of political participation of women in any society acts as a barometer of health of its democracy. There has been only a marginal increase in the number of women candidates fielded during the elections.

The number of women Parliamentarians has not exceeded 15% of all seats, in State legislatures their membership have been highest at 7.1% . women have the potential to transform the mainstream political culture by making it more transparent, accountable, participative and decriminalize it which would further provide for their entry in politics. The highest ever representation of women in Lok Sabha was 10.80% during 2009 and 15.4% in Rajya Sabha in 1991. However, in the 2004 parliamentary Elections, there has been a decline in the number of women elected to the lower House (Lok Sabha) from 49 out of a total of 543 members to 44 out of 539 members. Their numbers have increased from 20 to 28 out of the total of 245 members in Rajya Sabha.

Table:1 WOMEN'S PRESENCE IN THE LOK SABHA 1952-2009

Election Year	Total seats	Total Women MP's	% Women MP's
1952	499	22	4.40
1957	500	27	5.40
1962	503	34	6.80
1967	523	31	5.90
1971	521	22	4.20
1977	544	19	3.30
1980	544	28	5.20
1984	544	44	8.10
1989	517	27	5.20

1991	544	39	7.20
1996	543	39	7.20
1998	543	43	7.90
Average till 1998	527	31	5.90
1999	545	49	8.65
2004	539	44	8.16
2009	545	59	10.80

Source: Election Commission Of India

Table:2 WOMEN’S PRESENCE IN THE RAJYA SABHA

YEAR	TOTAL SEATS	NO. OF WOMEN MEMBERS	% OF WOMEN MEMBERS
1952	219	16	7.3
1957	237	18	7.6
1962	238	18	7.6
1967	240	20	8.3
1971	243	17	7.0
1977	244	25	10.2
1980	244	24	9.8
1984	244	28	11.4
1989	245	24	9.7
1991	245	38	15.5
1992	245	17	6.9
1994	245	20	8.1
1996	223	20	9.0
1997	245	18	7.3
1998	245	15	6.1
1999	245	19	7.8
2004	245	28	11.4
2005	245	28	11.4

Source: www.parliamentofindia.nic.in

Women’s participate more actively on issues of health, welfare, atrocities against women, crimes like dowry, violation of human rights, issues of defence, finance and politics donot attract them. In india adult franchise was granted in 1937. The Constitution of india guarantees equal rights to men and women as voters and citizens. Registration and participation of women as

contestants is less than that of men. The percentage of seats won against the seats contested is showing a declining trend. However, voting for women in all tiers of government has always been a feature of Indian polity since 1947. Due to exercise of their franchise both literate and illiterate women are showing awareness about their rights, their utility and issues confronting them. Political parties approach women for short-term goals of winning elections but not for long-term goal of gender equality in political power sharing.

TABLE-3: STATE AND UT WISE PERFORMANCE OF WOMEN CANDIDATES IN 2004 GENERAL ELECTIONS (14th LOK SABHA)

STATE/UNI ON TERRITORIES	NO. OF SEATS	NO. OF WOMEN CONTESTANTS	NO. OF WOMEN ELECTED
Andhra Pradesh	42	21	03
Arunachal Pradesh	02	0	0
Assam	14	06	0
Bihar	40	14	03
Goa	02	01	0
Gujarat	26	11	01
Haryana	10	08	01
Himachal Pradesh	04	02	01
J&K	06	04	01
Karnataka	28	10	02
Kerela	20	15	02
Madhya Pradesh	29	30	02
Maharashtra	48	29	05
Manipur	02	01	0
Meghalaya	02	0	0

Mizoram	01	0	0
Nagaland	01	0	0
Orissa	21	09	02
Punjab	13	10	02
Rajasthan	25	17	02
Sikkim	01	0	0
Tamil nadu	39	23	04
Tripura	02	0	0
UP	80	61	07
West Bengal	43	34	04
Chhatisgarh	11	12	01
Jharkhand	14	13	01
Uttranchal	05	05	0
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	01	01	0
Chandigarh	01	01	0
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	01	01	0
Daman & Diu	01	0	0
Delhi	07	15	01
Lakshadweep	01	01	0
Pondicherry	01	01	0

The mainstream political parties field less women candidates due to their low literacy, family background, financial position, involvement in politics, local conditions, campaign strategy, popularity within the party and personality. Almost all political parties hesitate to field women candidates in elections because it is the question of winning the seat, it is not the question of representation. They want to field qualified, safe and popular candidates.

TABLE-4: POLITICAL PARTY WISE PICTURE OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN 2004 LOK SABHA ELECTIONS

POLITICAL PARTY	NO.OF WOMEN CONTESTED ELECTIONS	NO. OF WOMEN WON ELECTIONS	% OF WOMEN WON ELECTIONS
BJP	30	10	33.30
BSP	20	01	05.00
CPI	02	00	00.00
CPI(M)	08	05	62.50
INC	45	12	26.67
NCP	05	02	40.00
National Parties	110	30	27.27
State Parties	66	14	21.21
Registered(ungorganized) Parties	62	01	01.61
Independent Candidates	117	00	00.00
Total	355	45	12.68

Source: Election Commission of India

Out of 556 women contesting 2009 General Elections, 59 women were elected to the 15th Lok Sabha, of which 23 belonged to the Indian National Congress. The Bhartiya Janta Party came second with 13 women being elected. The All India Trinmool Congress, Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party follow with four women each getting elected to the Lok Sabha. The Janta Dal-United, Shiromani Akali Dal and Nationalist Congress Party have two women MP's each. The Telangana Rashtra Samiti Rashtriya Lok Dal, Shiv Sena, DMK and Communist Party of India-Marxist have only one women MP each.

Some women occupy important administrative positions such as Secretaries of Departments in National as well as State Governments. Women occupy only 5.17% of administrative services.

Representation of women in premier civil services is not encouraging. There has been a noticeable increase in Indian Administrative Services, Indian Audit And Accounts Services, Indian Economic services and Indian Statistical Services. The number of women in Indian Police Services and Indian Foreign services is appallingly low. As far as judiciary is concerned, there is a women judge in the Supreme Court out of 25 judges and 25 women judges in the High Courts across the country out of 514 judges as on 31st May 2005.

TABLE-5: WOMEN IN ALL INDIA SERVICES

S. N O.	SER VICE	YE AR	TO TA L	MA LES	FEM ALES	% OF FEM ALES
1	IAS	1985	4284	3975	311	7.3
		1992	4928	4498	430	8.7
		1996	5047	4546	501	9.9
		1997	4991	4479	512	10.3
		2000	5159	4624	535	10.4
2	IPS	1985	2343	2325	18	0.8
		1992	2825	2773	52	1.8
		1996	2947	2883	64	2.2
		1997	2964	2868	96	3.3
		1998	2985	2885	100	3.4
		1999	3115	3007	108	3.5
		2000	3301	3191	110	3.3

3	IFS	1985	535	485	50	9.3
		1992	721	658	83	8.7
		1995	547	481	66	12.1
		1996	567	501	66	11.6
		1997	586	519	67	11.4
		1998	587	520	67	11.4

Source: Department of Personnel and Training, GOI, Ministry of Home Affairs, GOI.

TABLE-6: STATE WISE NUMBER OF ELECTED WOMEN PANCHAYAT REPRESENTATIVES IN THREE TIERS, 2002.

S. N O.	STAT ES/UT	GP		BP		ZP	
		Wo me n	Tot al	Wo me n	To tal	Wo me n	To tal
1	Andhra Pradesh	68736	208291	4919	14617	364	1095
2	Arunchal Pradesh	0	0	0	0	0	0
3	Assam	7851	23471	746	2148	117	390
4	Bihar	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	Goa	457	1439	0	0	17	50
6	Gujarat	41180	123470	1312	3919	274	817
7	Haryana	18356	54646	842	2430	109	314
8	Himachal Pradesh	6822	18549	562	1658	87	251

	h						
9	J&K	0	0	0	0	0	0
10	Karnataka	359 22	800 73	137 5	32 55	339	89 0
11	Kerala	480 1	132 59	629	16 38	105	30 7
12	Madhya Pradesh	106 491	314 847	215 9	64 56	248	73 4
13	Maharashtra	775 48	232 644	140 7	39 02	658	19 51
14	Manipur	611	172 2	0	0	22	61
15	Meghalaya	0	0	0	0	0	0
16	Mizoram	0	0	0	0	0	0
17	Nagaland	0	0	0	0	0	0
18	Orissa	314 14	875 47	218 8	62 27	296	85 4
19	Punjab	269 39	754 73	813	24 80	89	27 9
20	Rajasthan	394 50	114 282	190 8	52 57	364	10 08
21	Sikkim	322	873	0	0	29	92
22	Tamil Nadu	261 81	974 58	177 0	65 70	173	65 6
23	Tripura	189 5	568 6	106	29 9	28	82
24	UP	0	0	0	0	0	0
25	West Bengal	114 97	512 00	192 3	85 79	156	72 3
26	Chhattisgarh	419 13	124 211	906	26 39	95	27 4
27	Jharkhand	0	0	0	0	0	0
28	Uttaranchal	0	0	0	0	0	0
29	Andaman & Nicobar	261	759	25	67	10	30

	Islands						
30	Chandigarh	55	162	6	15	3	10
31	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	45	124	0	0	4	12
32	Daman & Diu	17	63	0	0	10	25
33	Delhi	0	0	0	0	0	0
34	Lakshadweep	30	79	0	0	8	22
35	Pondicherry	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	548 794	163 032	235 96	72 15	360 5	10 92
			7		6		7

Source: Ministry Of Statistics and Programme Implementation, GOI

REASONS FOR LOW PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN:

Patriarchal culture, social structure, level of education, income, caste, occupation and even urbanity exert direct impact on political participation of women. In our country, women is known mainly by her relation to a man as a daughter, wife and a mother. Almost all political parties have women cells or wings but few women leaders could reach the position of President or party head. Women are systematically excluded from full participation in male dominated social and political institutions in the name of religion, culture and tradition. Feminist political scientists and development personnel have long argued for policies that integrate women into economic and social processes not on grounds of equality but because women as policy makers influence policies differently than men. Women give high

priority to social security, health care, water, sanitation and issues related to women and children.

Reservation does not discriminate but compensate women, it gives them experience of political life and broadens their base in political process.

CORRECTIVE MEASURES:

The Government of India acknowledged the recommendations of the Committee for Status of Women in India (CSWI) in 1974. The recommendations of the National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988 acknowledges the problems of under-representation and recommended 30% reservation for women in local Government. 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act “a silent revolution” provided 33% reservation for women in Panchayat Raj Institutions and helped 3 million women to shape policies at the local level. It provided reservation for Dalits (Scheduled Castes) and Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes), gave Constitutional status to both rural and urban local governments and allocated funds, functions and functionaries to local bodies.

There has been a considerable decline in corruption due to pressure exerted by women on their male counterparts. In rural India there has been a total of 2,25,000 Gram Panchayats with a membership of 22,50,000 elected representatives, of these 7,50,000 are Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe members, of which 50,000 are women. Of 2,25,000 Chairpersons, one-third (75,000) are women. Karnataka has women representation of 45%, 42% and 38% in the village, block and district Panchayats respectively. In Kerala 36.4% and in West

Bengal 35.4% of elected women representatives are women. In Uttar Pradesh 54% of Zila Parishad Presidents are women. In Tamil Nadu 36% of Gram Panchayat Chairpersons are women. Several states that had less than one-third women at Gram Panchayat level in the first tenure has exceeded the mandate in the second tenure. They include Rajasthan, Assam, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. In Bihar, Panchayat elections were held for the first time in 2001 and despite resistance and violence, about 1,25,000 women contested for about 40,000 seats reserved for them.

FINDINGS

AND

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Women are no longer a bewildered and confused lot but grew out of this experience as mature, confident leaders who are trusted and honored by society. In some of the families women are the principal bread earners. They give maximum time to agriculture, rearing cattle, hen ducks and mowing grass, collecting wild food and vegetables and even working in unorganized sector to help their male counterparts run the families. Proxy representation leads to lack of confidence among women, who feels so vulnerable to even talk confidently with others. Independent initiatives of elected women representatives are discouraged by over interference of political parties. Principles of democratic centralisation or rigid party control in the name of party discipline looms as a threat to women participation in the functioning of Panchayats. Most of the female representatives at the Gram Panchayat level were not even aware of the rules and regulations of the panchayats as they could not even read panchayat manuals or

understand the details of the programme. There is a need to launch leadership training programmes for women representatives at the Gram Panchayat level as short-term training programmes conducted at the block level are not sufficient for acquiring adequate knowledge about the functioning of panchayats.

Gram Panchayat members mainly act like agents for implementing government sponsored schemes rather than the performers of local self government, but still women have neither access nor control in decision making process inspite of good education, money and political backup, they have nothing to say but to obey orders which are imposed on them.

Recommendations: The success of political empowerment of women depends on revitalization of PRI's, electoral reforms, drive for political education, gender sensitization campaigns, enlargement of employment opportunities for rural women, availability of support services, elimination of direct and indirect discriminatory practices and special mechanism to induct women at all levels of decision making to ensure that they form a critical mass. Therefore, Government should ensure devolution of power, function and funds through statutory provisions and clearly defined roles and responsibilities of elected representatives at different tiers of Panchayats. The women should be familiarized with the procedures of conducting meetings, managing finances of Panchayats, participatory planning, resource mapping and amalgamation of local plan with the district plan. Women should be engaged in gainful economic activities. Women leaders at different tiers of panchayats who have successfully implemented welfare and development schemes need to be encouraged by

publicizing their leadership qualities and honouring them in public meetings, it will encourage their counterparts and their success stories will be replicated.

CONCLUSION:

Indian culture and social ethos are influenced by patriarchal value system, as a result women have not been independent decision-makers in the country. They are discriminated in terms of access to food and health care. Visible and invisible violence against them are increasing. Reservation itself can only be regarded as the first step in this direction. Proper social, economic and political environment should be created to enable women to participate effectively in local government institutions. A three-dimensional approach represented by political will of the people, people's general political awareness and constitutional and legislative measures should be developed. The malefolk think that politics is a challenging career which demands hard work, extensive travels, capacity for fund raising and building up party units which women without grit and dynamism cannot handle. Moreover, sometimes educated women may think it below their status to mingle with people belonging to low castes. But as time goes, women will acquire the skills, learn the rules of the game and work according to their own agenda and create a better village community based on co-operation, harmony, gender balance and justice.

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