

POLITICS AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Women are said to be Shakti, the epitome of power. The Shakti is worshipped in temples on one hand and on the other hand, the women are disrespected and abused. There have been growing instances of violence against women. The incidents of dowry deaths, female foeticide, rape, sexual abuse, physical abuse, eve-teasing, etc. are ever-increasing. No doubt laws are there in place for the protection of women but these only provide the penalty for the crime; these laws do not put an end to such crimes. Women could protect themselves only when they are empowered. Women's Empowerment refers to making women independent, self-sufficient, and capable of taking decisions for themselves. Only when women are empowered can they protect themselves against the odds and utilize opportunities provided to them to grow. Political Empowerment is an important aspect of women's empowerment. It includes within its ambit the empowerment of women voters, contests, and legislators.

Keywords-: Politics, Women, Women Empowerment, Political Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

India is a place where on one side Durga, Kali, Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Shakti are worshiped and on the other, women are abused and crimes against women are ever-increasing. Women are assigned certain roles by society and they are expected to work within that framework. They are expected to stay at home and take care of the children, do the household chores, and serve the family. With such a burden the women could not dare to work outside the home. On top of this, they have to bear the abuses of the husband and mental and physical harassment for getting a dowry, etc. The life of an Indian woman starts with the family and ends with the family. Even if some women gather the courage to go outside and work, the world outside does not let them breathe peacefully. Crimes against women outside the home are rampant, be it sexual harassment at the workplace, rape, abuse, etc. which puts down the flame of courage. The only way women could live a normal life is by empowering i.e by giving control of their

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life her hands. Women need to be empowered in every field, be it working at shops, doing their own business, working at home, in politics, etc.

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

"The term 'empowerment of women' refers to the process of providing power to women to become free from the control of others; it also refers to the process of providing equal rights, opportunities, responsibilities, and power positions to women so that they are able to play a role on par with men in the society."¹ Empowerment refers to providing independence, and opportunities to grow and become self-sufficient and also making them efficient in making decisions for themselves. In addition to this, there is a need to acknowledge the rights of women, providing them freedom to taking decisions and making choices, providing them access to education and employment, and also ensuring their active participation in politics.

The need for the empowerment of women arises for the reason that the majority of women are economically dependent on men. Only when women are self-sufficient and start earning for themselves can they independently take decisions for themselves? Yet another reason is the poor literacy rate. Today, in India, as per the 2011 Census, around 65.46% women are literate in India as compared to 82.4% men. With such gender disparity in education, there is an ardent need for the implementation of the schemes of the Government of India like Beti Padhao Beti Bachao, CBSE Udaan Scheme, National Scheme of Incentive for the Girls of Secondary Education, etc. Only with education can women be made aware of their rights and duties. Education is an important key to their growth and empowerment. Other reasons are ensuring their health, reducing atrocities against them, etc.

The Indian Legislature through its various legislations has provided for the empowerment of women and has also safeguarded their interests. The Dowry Prohibition Act, of 1961² makes taking dowry before, after, or during the course of marriage an offense; the Hindu Marriage Act, of 1955³ prohibits polygamy and child marriage and also provides for the right to divorce and remarry; the Hindu Succession Act, 1956⁴ provides for the right to succession of the family property to the women; the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956⁵ provides childless women the right to adopt a child and also claim maintenance from the husband after divorce;

¹ C. N Shankar Rao, *Sociology* (7th Edition, S. Chand and Company Limited 2018) 192

² Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961

³ Hindu Marriage Act, 1955

⁴ Hindu Succession Act, 1956

⁵ Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956

the Maternity Benefits Act, 1961⁶ provides maternity benefits to the salaried women; the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique Act, 1994 prohibits sex determination, reducing the cases of killing of girl child in mother's womb; etc.

The Indian Judiciary has too played an important role in the empowerment of women by passing important judgments on various aspects like ensuring a safe working environment for women at the workplace (*Vishakha v. State of Rajasthan*)⁷, the right of the women to equal share in father's property (*Mary Roy v. the State of Kerala*)⁸, right of an adult woman to marry or live with anyone of choice (*Lata Singh v. State of Uttar Pradesh*)⁹, stringent guidelines on the unregulated sale of acids- owing to increased instances of acid attack on women (*Laxmi v. Union Of India*)¹⁰, right of any women, whether married or unmarried to terminate pregnancy up to 24 weeks, etc.

In order to ensure that women in India are empowered, the following rights provided for to women by the Indian Constitution need to be implemented: Article 14¹¹ (equality to all, including of men and women), Article 15(3)¹² (arrangements to be made in order to provide protection to women and ensure their welfare), providing for equal remuneration for equal work, Article 243D¹³ (reservation of not less than $\frac{1}{3}$ seats in panchayats for women), Article 243T¹⁴ (reservation of not less than $\frac{1}{3}$ seats in municipalities for women), etc.

INDIAN WOMEN IN POLITICS

"Politics is the functioning of the whole arrangement of institutions and forces which are involved in molding the lives of people by way of decision-making policies and effective control over the apparatus of the states in getting the same implemented."¹⁵ "Politics includes an array of activities. Conventional political activities include voting, campaigning in elections, convincing other persons to vote in a particular manner, attending public meetings, distributing party literature, joining a party, contributing money to a party, contesting elections, and holding

⁶ Maternity Benefits Act, 1961

⁷ *Vishakha v. State of Rajasthan* 1997, AIR 1997 SC 3011

⁸ *Mary Roy v. State of Kerala* 1986, AIR 1986 SC 1011

⁹ *Lata Singh Vs State of Uttar Pradesh* 2006, (2006) 5 SCC 475

¹⁰ *Laxmi v. Union of India* 2014, (2014) 4 SCC 427

¹¹ Constitution of India, art 14

¹² Constitution of India, art 15

¹³ Constitution of India, art 243D

¹⁴ Constitution of India, art 243T

¹⁵ Manuka Khanna, "Political Participation of women in India" (2009) 70(1) *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 56-57 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41856495>> accessed 11 February, 2023

public or party office."¹⁶ "In the present times, the term political participation has been broadened to include all those political acts through which people directly affect the political decision-making process."¹⁷ "It includes such activities as strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, mass movements, marches, presentation of memoranda as well as violent acts designed to change the political system or unconventional political activities."¹⁸ "Thus, political participation is a complex phenomenon, a dependent variable that depends upon many factors such as the psychological, socio-economic and political, which orient the individual towards or away from political participation."¹⁹

The roots of the political participation of Indian women could be traced back to the *19th century*. "Pandit Ramabai, Manorama Majumdar, Sarala Debi Goshal who started Bharata Stree Mahamandal for the education of women, and Swarna Kumari Debi who started the women's organization Sakhi Samiti in 1886 for widows are a few examples."²⁰ "These activities gave momentum to women's participation in public spaces, which paved the way for their entry into the independence struggle."²¹ In the *20th century*, the swadeshi movement in Bengal marked the participation of women in nationalist activities. Women leaders like Sister Nivedita, Madame Cama, Kumudini Mitra, etc. lead the women in nationalist activities. In 1917, the first truly feminist organization in India, the Indian Women's Council was founded.

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"Women who were strong leaders in the *Independence movement* were Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Arun Asaf Ali, and Basanti De."²² "Thousands of women joined in the salt Satyagraha, which is "generally remembered as the first time 'masses of Indian women' got involved in the struggle for Independence."²³ The *political participation of women includes 3 aspects within its ambit*: participation of women as voters, participation of women as candidates in elections, and participation of women as members of Lok Sabha and of Rajya Sabha. Considering the statistics of the Election Commission of India, the percentage of women in the Lok Sabha has increased from 2.9% in 1952-57 (First Lok Sabha election period) to 10.9% in 2009-14 (Fifteenth Lok Sabha election period). At present, there are around 82

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Maroju Rama Chary, "Women and Political Participation in India: A Historical Perspective" (2012) 73(1) 120 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41856567>> accessed 11 February, 2023

²¹ Ibid

²² Maroju Rama Chary, "Women and Political Participation in India: A Historical Perspective" (2012) 73(1) 121 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41856567>> accessed 11 February, 2023

²³ Ibid

women in the Lok Sabha. "Share of women members in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha stands at 14.94% and 14.05%, respectively; the average number of women MLAs in Assemblies across the nation accounts for only 8%."²⁴ If we analyze the women legislators' post-independence, from the first Lok Sabha to the Seventeenth Lok Sabha (2019-2024), the participation of women in politics has increased. However, when compared to the participation of men, they are still lagging behind. In order to ensure better laws for the empowerment of women, the percentage of women legislators in the Indian Parliament needs to be increased; the new laws made ought to be perceived from the perspective of women as well, they being the majority of the population on whom it would be ultimately implemented. Likewise, the number of women voters has also increased over the years. Nowadays, political parties announce various schemes to vote women. This indicates how much importance this class of voters has on the election result.

Though the participation of Indian women in politics is increasing still most are hesitant and avoid entering into politics because of the following reasons:

Traditional Norms regarding women: Indian society primarily provides the role of nurturer and caregiver to women. It is a general perception of people that women are supposed to confine themselves to the home and take care of the family. This idea is largely prevalent in the rural then the urban area where women prefer to go out and work. This, however, is not easy due to the lack of help and support from the family. Women are expected to manage both household work and work outside the home, with the least help from other members of the family. In such a situation, they are often forced to leave their work and manage their homes.

Being in politics requires both time and dedication, which the women, owing to the above-mentioned situations are not able to provide and hence they refrain from entering into politics. "Even if they start off at a later stage, after fulfilling their responsibilities towards their children and family, it requires more time and energy to compete with men who had started off at an early age."²⁵

Regional Setup: The behavior pattern of a woman depends upon the caste, class, status, area, region, etc. a woman belongs. The social, economic, political, cultural, and geographical

²⁴ "19 State Legislatures have less than 10% women members: Centre" (*The Hindu* 11 December, 2022) <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/19-state-legislatures-have-less-than-10-women-members-center/article66252443.ece/amp/>> accessed 7 February, 2023

²⁵ Manuka Khanna (n 15)

factors also affect the behavior of a woman. Similarly, women are affected by their environmental setup to play political roles.

Lack of Economic Independence: "Majority of the women lack legal control over their property and effective control over their income."²⁶ In case they work inside their home, their work and efforts are titled as their duty towards their family and hence they are not remunerated for the same. All the income that the women earn ultimately comes into the hands of the men of the family, be it fathers or husbands, and hence they need to take permission to spend their own hard-earned income. Hence, due to the lack of control over their income, they cannot spend the required amount on political campaigns. Only those women who have the financial support of their families can contest the elections.

Culture of Violence during elections: Instances of booth capturing, beating, and killing members of the opposite parties, etc. somewhat discourage the women from performing their utmost right and duty of voting. In addition to this, due to the growing instances of physical assault, rape, and murder of women in the political sphere, the men usually do not allow the women of their house for contesting elections and invite such problems not only for themselves but also their families.

Role of Patriarch: "The decision to enter politics is rarely made by women themselves. It is made by their male relatives, especially their father and/or husband."²⁷ The women who contest elections usually do so when asked by the men of the family as it is ultimately they who assume the power and work on behalf of the women. They are the ones who attend the meetings on behalf of the women candidates and at times it is they who have the signing authority. Talking about the other aspect of political participation i.e voting, it is usually men of the house who decide as to whom the vote of the family is put to.

HOW COULD THE INDIAN WOMEN BE EMPOWERED IN POLITICS?

Implementation of the Constitution in Spirit: One way women could be empowered in politics is the implementation of the provisions of the Constitution made for their welfare in letter and spirit. The provisions regarding political equality (Articles 325 and 326 of the Indian Constitution), providing reservation of not less than $\frac{1}{3}$ seats in panchayats (Article 243 D),

²⁶ Manuka Khanna, "Political Participation of women in India" (2009) 70(1) The Indian Journal of Political Science 59 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41856495>> accessed 11 February, 2023

²⁷ Niroj Sinha, *Empowerment of Women through Political Participation* (Kalpaz Publication 2007) 235

providing reservation of not less than $\frac{1}{3}$ seats in municipalities (Article 243 T), etc. In addition to these, the various schemes devised by the Government also need to be implemented.

Passing and Implementation of the Women Reservation Bill: "The Constitution (One Hundred and Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2008, commonly known as the Women Reservation Bill seeks to reserve one-third of all seats for women in the Lok Sabha and the state legislative assemblies. The allocation of reserved seats shall be determined by such authority as prescribed by Parliament."²⁸ "One-third of the total number of seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes shall be reserved for women of those groups in the Lok Sabha and the legislative assemblies. Reserved seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in the state or union territory."²⁹ Passing this bill and its implementation is important for the empowerment of women and also the welfare of the general public as it is often observed the legislation made by the women legislators' leads to commendable development and overall well-being of the society.

Stringent Measures to reduce violence: Incidents like booth capturing, fighting, killing, rape, physical violence against women, eve-teasing, etc. are very common during elections. Only when these incidents are stalled can women participate in political activities. "Strict measures should be taken against such politicians and contestants who through their money and muscle-power want to ensure their electoral victory."³⁰ "The Election Commission should devise measures to cancel the election of such contestants who indulge in violent activities during elections."³¹ "The State Administration should exercise extra caution and take strict measures to control and ensure peaceful elections."³²

At least 33% women candidates to be set up by a political party: "The Election Commission of India should give serious thought to devising some measures to ensure that the Political Parties are compelled to put up a good percentage of women candidates, at least 33% of the total candidates set up by any Party."³³ "A consensus should be evolved by the important Political Parties through meetings, debates, and discussions. The Election Commission should

²⁸ "Women's Reservation Bill [The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, 2008]" (*PRS Legislative Research*) <<https://prsindia.org/billtrack/womens-reservation-bill-the-constitution-108th-amendment-bill-2008-45>> accessed 25 February, 2023

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Niroj Sinha, *Empowerment of Women through Political Participation* (Kalpaz Publication 2007) 237

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

find ways and means to compel the Political Parties to take this measure for ensuring women's entry into electoral politics."³⁴

Spread of Literacy: Literacy is an important tool for the growth and development of any person. It is an important means through which women could be empowered politically. Literate women know how to earn well and also to take care of their finances. They are less likely to be dependent on and influenced by the male members of the family. They are aware of their legal rights and hence know how to implement their property rights and also the right to vote. With finances in their hands, they are economically independent and hence could spend on their election campaigns. With economic independence, a big hurdle in their political empowerment is removed.

CONCLUSION

To strengthen the position of women in society it is important to ensure their active political participation is at par with men. "The entry of women into politics and decision-making structures can change the policies, vision, and structure of institutions."³⁵ "They could redefine political priorities, and place new items on the political agenda to address gender-specific concerns and provide a new perspective on mainstream political issues."³⁶ The change in society could only be seen when women are empowered. Women legislators provide for the viewpoint of the women for whom the laws are to be made and implemented and hence such laws are most likely to be efficient and fulfill the purpose of their making. Women voters to form an important part of the system which is evident from the number of schemes announced by the political parties to vote women voters.

There are a lot of challenges for women in politics. These could be reduced by the implementation of the laws and also exercising certain stringent measures. The women could be empowered by the implementation of the provisions of the Constitution in spirit, passing and implementing of the Women Reservation Bill, taking stringent measures to reduce political violence, the spread literacy, etc. All these measures taken would only be successful if the women develop in themselves the urge to be empowered and to be in power with men. Only

³⁴ Niroj Sinha, *Empowerment of Women through Political Participation* (Kalpaz Publication 2007) 238

³⁵ Manuka Khanna, "Political Participation of women in India" (2009) 70(1) *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 62 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41856495>> accessed 11 February, 2023

³⁶ *Ibid*

when the women decide to take a stand for themselves and fight the system of patriarchy can they move forward on the path of development?

