

Participation Of Women In Indian Politics And The Role Of Media

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Abstract:

Political participation of women in any country gives an overview of how women are treated in society. The development of any country also depends on the equal participation of men and women. Since women's presence is seemed to be low in Indian politics, it is the duty of every human being to make them aware of their rights and motivate them for participating in mainstream politics. The constitution of India not only guarantees equality in society but also suggests states to make special provisions for women. Women still are fighting for equal status in society. Because of their low representation in Indian politics, their issues and problems are generally unseen and unnoticed. Their genuine demands are not raised before the decisions makers. Women need be dependent to make their own decisions. The media plays a significant role in determining how women in politics and decision-making bodies are viewed and perceived by society in general. It does not only play an important role in shaping the values of society but also reflects those values. It plays the role of an informer, educator and a mediator for social change. To have strong democratic governance, women's equal participation is must and therefore their contribution to this processes needs to be analyzed in the appropriate context by the media. There cannot be a real democracy if the voices and issues of women that constitute half the population of the country are ignored or sidelined. This paper analyzes the role of media about women's participation in national politics and also analyzes whether or not women's voices and issues are articulated to the public as matters of importance.

Keywords: Participation, Empowerment, Obstacles, Decision Making, Media.

WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS: AN OVERVIEW

'It is very difficult for a woman to make up her mind to enter politics. Once she makes up her own mind, then she has to prepare her husband, and her children, and her family. Once she has overcome all these obstacles and applies for the ticket, then the male aspirants against whom she is applying make up all sorts of stories about her. And after all this, when her name goes to the party bosses, they do not select her name because they fear losing that seat.'

The above quote of Sushma Swaraj (Union External Affairs Minister) gives a glimpse of reality that how women have to face so many problems and criticisms while entering the politics. India, being the largest democratic country in the world has very low representation of women in politics. Lesser women are seen in holding key positions and decision making positions in the political arena. The marginalization of Indian women in politics is as old as the Indian society. Their low representation in political sphere is one of the main reasons for the exclusion of the interests of women in governance and development paradigms. They have been kept

aside from political discourse since their childhood. Men and women have always equally shared their dedication towards the development of the nation. They have worked shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts in pre independent as well as post independent India. Contribution of Rani Laxmi Bai, Durga Bai Deshmukh, Savitribai Phule, Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Madam Bhikaji Cama, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Aruna Asaf Ali, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamala Nehru, Vijaylaxmi Pandit, Sucheta Kriplani. Padmaja Naidu, Kalpana Dutta, Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Sister Nivedita, Margaret Nobel, Mira Alphonse, Meera Behn, Sarla Bhen, etc. in the Indian freedom struggle is highly noticeable. But their work was always kept unnoticed.

Women's participation in politics of any country gives a strong message globally not only in terms of equality and freedom of liberty but also in the space provided for women in the democratic framework of electoral politics. India has one of the strongest laws that provide women a life with full honor and dignity. But the customs, patriarchal set ups and societal norms have always treated them as

subordinate to men. They are always taught to be submissive. Because of unequal distribution of resources, women do not have adequate resources, be it economic, material or human. Women are expected to work in private sphere only and are generally barred from working outside their homes. Their financial dependence over men also keeps them away from strong political affiliations.

The policies generally are made as gender blind because of male dominance over policy framing. Keeping women away from public sphere brings lack of political will amongst themselves. Because of patriarchal set up and male dominance over political parties, women do not get chances of contesting elections. The parties do not engage and encourage women in its decision making policies while finalizing their contestants. Women coming from less privileged background, without any political cleavage by virtue of birth, marriage or other close relative political cleavage have to face molestation and sexual harassment like situations. Because of the fear of harassment or violence, they do not show their full interest in political activities.

It is the need of the hour in a country like India to have equal participation of women in mainstream political activity. Society needs to deconstruct the stereotype of women as limited to household activities only. The nature of society has a crucial impact on the extent and effectiveness of women's political participation. Their low representation in decision making institutions signifies deep flaws in the political structure of country. Historical, social and cultural factors have restricted women from enjoying their rights of participation in political processes.

OBSTACLES IN WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Illiteracy is one of the main hurdles in making women as politically empowered. Because of lack of understanding they do not know about their basic and political rights. The parties not only discriminate in terms of seat allotments in the elections, but also in the party ranks. Patriarchal context of India is also the reason for non involvement of women in the political arena. There are many reasons which are restricting women from being politically active. These reasons include the existing societal value system, the private-public

divide in terms of domain identification and male preponderance in political institutions. Because of their low proportion in inner political party structure of India, they are failed to gather resources and support for nurturing their political constituencies. Women do not get adequate financial support from the political parties to contest the elections. Traditional roles assigned to them are also major constraints in women's political participation. Because of unequal distribution of resources or lack of resources and lack of education, they do not avail sufficient political training.

Societal and cultural norms imposed on women bar them from entering politics. They have to accept the dictats imposed on them and bear the burden of society. They also bear their deprivation and undermining status thinking as a culture of the society. The society is full of prejudices and a victim of lack and poor awareness. Lack of participation of women in community based activities is also one of the major constraints. Almost all the resources are controlled by the male counterparts. Women do not have any say in these resources. They also do not own income generating opportunities.

Poverty is also a great challenge in realizing women's political participation. The girl child in a poor family is the main victim and has to face many problems. The rate of school drop outs is also found to be comparatively higher in case of women. Because of the social and cultural norms, women's mindset is developed in a sense to accept that they are of a lower class than men because this has been the point of view of many in the society. On the one hand, women's literacy rate is improving. But on the other, rare women are found in higher studies because they are made to leave the schools immediately after completing their basic studies. Caste system or class structure prevalent in society is also a big hurdle. Women of lower caste could not attend schools because of the low level of income of their families. These women got themselves indulged in less paying work to take care of their families. Mostly women in India do not own lands and properties. They even hardly get any share in their parent's property.

Women not only have lack of awareness about their rights enshrined in India constitution but also the lack of political will. Women's low health

status in the country is also a major constraint in women's participation. There is a bias in the access of healthcare facilities in the country. Gender discrimination in case of health care facilities also begins before birth. Most of the girl children are aborted because of son preference in the family. Once born, daughters are deprived of getting those feeding services as boys do. Women are also viewed as less privileged due to marriage obligations and dowry systems. Hospitals are also termed to be gender biased as men are found more in visiting hospitals more frequently than women.

ROLE OF MEDIA IN CHANGING THE MINDSET OF SOCIETY

Breaking all the barriers, women need to be active participants in mainstream politics. This is not possible without making them politically aware. Media, which is considered to be the best medium of creating awareness among society, needs to play a proactive role. In case of highlighting women's issues, media role has been a matter of debate. Media stereotyped the image of women as homemakers and limited to private sphere only. It sometimes does not focus on woman's political performance. Their values, beliefs and experiences are not only overlooked by the media but also their interest in political participation is criticized citing the reasons of cultural beliefs.

Mainstream media is the source of information for every citizen. People get political news and information through television, newspapers, magazines, radio and news websites. Upto some extent, media is proved to be the strong medium of making women as politically empowered. Women succeeded build a sense of who they are and who they could be. It not only educates the masses but also keeps engaged with the wider world. Media is the backbone of democracy which not only informs us about social, political and economic activities happening around the world but also teaches the ways of living a healthy life. Because of its wide reach, it can spread message to the large audience in a very short time. It informs the masses about government policies and programs and also tells them how these programs can be useful to them. It has the power to change the mindset of public. Acting as an agent of social change, media is a tremendous source of information for individuals as well as in society. Media highlights the people's

problems and brings them before the policy and decision makers. By shaping the public opinion, media can be an instrument of effective mobilization of national progress. This is the only way for a democracy to survive which not only draws attention to the bad policies of the government but also draws support for the positive initiatives. The media's autonomy has been reflected in their fast growing diversified content. In this fast growing world, it is also necessary to have a diverse range of media channels and groups. Along with mainstream media, alternative media also have a great impact our audiences for getting information. Mass audiences receive a broad spectrum of information from varying sources. Because of availability of different sources of information, people can make their own judgments and form their own opinions. The shortcomings of the mainstream media can be overcome by supporting alternative media, in both print and electronic like citizen journalism that gives an individual ample of opportunities to produce and disseminate information and opinions that are marginalized by the mainstream media. The media must be free from persons with vested interests like politicians and the advertisers.

Undoubtedly, media has played vital role in creating awareness among women and in empowering them up to some extent. Media helps women in identifying and adopting the ways of self actualization. Women are also becoming very active in journalism profession. Previously, they were rarely seen in journalism. But now, they are seen sitting with policy makers as well. To make change anywhere, one has to be the part of that group to change the stereotype. Media's role is sometimes criticized for not addressing serious issues about exploitation and unequal treatment of women in different spheres. Its role is also criticized to sensationalize the issues and use women as commodity for seeking the attention of viewers. Women's image is seen as submissive to men. Women's issues rarely got space in the leading stories of front pages.

CONCLUSION

Media has been fruitful up to some extent in supporting the efforts and movements for women's emancipation and truly highlighting the status of women in society. It has the power of reinforcing the stereotyped images of women and their roles in

society. A lot of work needs to be done for making women as equal partners in the political processes. Cultural and social barriers are to be looked open with serious concern. Communication is equally essential like food, shelter and health for people. The media is privileged to democratize the communication by providing a platform for public debate and reconstituting citizen as a public body in the form of public opinion. For more impact, public communication should also be made an integral part of democracy. It is the high time that media should highlight women's achievements with serious concern so that more women could get inspirations to be a part of social change and democratic process. Media has to be proactive in this context and needs to report in a positive manner that will bring out the fact that they are able and effective leaders. There is a long association between media and politics. No country could be developed unless the women are politically empowered. Media should recognize women politicians, their voices, their contributions in decision-making and highlight women's issues and also appreciate the work done by women in order increase their inclination towards political system. During electoral campaigns, media houses and publications should provide gender-sensitive coverage of elections. These information tools should also avoid negative stereotypes of women rather highlight women's image as effective leaders of the country. These should not be any bias on the grounds of sex during coverage of elections. Electronic media should specially broadcast such programmes that can educate women about their civic and political rights. Print media should also cover such stories so that more women could be aware of.

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