

# Issues and Challenges of Women Political Participation – An Empirical View

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## Abstract

In this paper author seeks to understand measurement of women's political participation at Local and Level. The present paper aims at studying the Indian democracy and the participation of womenfolk in the decision making process of the Indian Republic. True democracy is a system which in Abraham Lincoln's words, is a government of the people, by the people and for the people. While most of the democracies have given a system which has government elected by all the sections of societies, it is debatable whether the government comprises of all the diverse sections and importantly whether the government works for all the people of the democracy. In this context, the problem of low participation of women is of special concern for democracies and without changing that true democracy can never be achieved. Women's participation in decision-making is essential for women's interests to be incorporated into governance. It has been widely experienced that governance structures which do not provide for adequate participation of women, often suffer from state interventions which are neither inclusive nor democratic. Including women, especially in local governments is an essential step towards creating gender equal opportunities and gender sensitive policies. Since women have different needs and perspectives on social and political issues, it is important to involve women in governments to incorporate all of the societal viewpoints in policy and decision-making processes. Women are actively involved in household and community work and hence well aware of real issues faced by common people.

*Keywords— democracy, India, women political participation, adult franchise, Universal franchise.*

## Introduction

All changed with the advent of Gandhi who converted the freedom struggle into a mass movement involving all sections of society. The status of women in India has seen many ups and downs since ancient times - from at par status in ancient history to be in veils (Parda System) during the Medieval period. In the post independent India, the status of women regained its strength and has been on a rise ever since. Women in post- independent India have been participating in almost all types of economic activities, day-to day house- hold chores, voting for a better governance and also in active politics. India has elected a woman prime minister, Indira Gandhi, and a woman president, Pratibha Patil. In the present central government, women comprise roughly quarter of the Indian cabinet with portfolios like external affairs, commerce and human resource development. He understood that true freedom cannot be achieved if all the sections of the society are not truly represented. His most successful campaign against the imperial rule was fought on the issue of salt tax which brought Indian women to the forefront. Local issues started getting debated and women took center stage in this regard.2.2 Women Reservation BillPost Gandhi, India experienced centralization of planning which resulted in higher inequality in political decision making at the various levels. While Government was deeply concerned of issues of gender equality, women were not always a part of such decision making. Although, India has seen women participating in politics as the longest serving Prime minister, as chief ministers of various states,

members in national parliament and state legislative assemblies in large numbers, yet the occurrence of such events has not been commensurate to their population. In order to enable better women participation in active politics, authorities had been trying to put in reservation for women but have not been successful in true terms due to non-support from some of the regional parties. Back in history, one of the prominent member of freedom struggle, Sarojini Naidu rejected reservation for women, citing that women are not weak, timid, meek. She claimed that the demand for granting preferential treatment to women is an admission on her part of her inferiority and there has been no need for such a thing in India as the women have always been by the side of men. The issue of women's reservation again came to limelight in 1973 with voices recommending reservation for women in at least one third of the seats and eventually statutory women's panchayats at the village level were recommended to take care of the neglect of women in rural development programs through 73rd & 74th constitutional amendments in 1993. Women's Reservation Bill or the Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, is a pending bill in India which proposes to reserve 33 per cent of all seats in the Lower house of Parliament of India.

**Objective:** In this paper author seeks to understand measurement of women's political participation at Local and Level. The presence of women in local governments serves as an encouragement for other women to enter diverse professions and leads to breaking stereotypes of women's roles in society and public space

This paper intends to study the participation of women in Indian political ecosystem and the overall impact of their contribution to the upliftment of the Republic Representative organizations from the top level to the lowest level in three dimensions of political decision making, financial control and administrative management. It stands for people's right to initiate their own projects for local well-being and the power to execute and operate them in an autonomous manner. So decentralization is prime mechanism through which democracy becomes truly representative and responsive. The approach paper to ninth five year plan has given due consideration for decentralized planning. The approach paper states that the states are required to endow the panchayats with such powers and authority which enables them to function as institutions of self government as envisaged in the constitution. To enable the panchayats to prepare the plan for economic development and social justice, they should be backed with adequate finance, personnel and administrative supports. Mobilization of own resources by the panchayat will be one of the important priorities in the Ninth plan. In the ninth plan, it is expected that the 29 subjects identified in the Eleventh schedule would be transferred to Panchayats. Some of the states did prepare district plans, but these plans did not mark any effective step towards decentralized planning. The period of further plan was a landmark so far as the decentralized planning is concerned. During this period, the call for decentralized planning came into prominence and a central scheme was initiated to assist the states for strengthening their planning setup and extending it up to the district level. One of the important attempts in this direction is the report of the working group on block level planning (1978). This report known as the report of the Dantwala committee, grew out of the concern for (a) generating employment (b) assuring basic minimum infrastructure, and (d) promoting equity. all state legislative assemblies for women. The seats to be reserved in rotation will be determined by draw of lots in such a way that a seat shall be reserved only once in three consecutive general elections. Women's Reservation Bill, was passed in Rajya Sabha on March 9, 2010 But Lok Sabha could not clear the bill due to resistance of some regional parties on certain provisions of the bill.

**2.3 Panchayati Raj Reforms** Indian Constitution made provisions relating to the establishment, powers, and responsibilities of the

panchayats through the 73rd Amendment in 1993 with three tier system, viz, panchayats (village governance bodies) at the village, intermediate and district levels in every state, except provision of skipping intermediate level in states with less than twenty lakh population. The states have been empowered through law for the composition of panchayats. The reform provided for reservation of both seats and leadership positions for the Scheduled Castes, tribes, and women. A normal duration of five years for panchayats has been provided with the authority of preparing the electoral rolls and conducting elections in the state Election Commission. The state government is also empowered to make laws providing criteria for disqualification of candidature from panchayat elections and also to legislate with respect to maintenance of accounts by the panchayats and their audit. Apart from providing political empowerment, the Panchayati Raj reforms endow the panchayats with necessary powers and authority to enable them to function as institutions of self-government and for the devolution of powers and responsibilities upon panchayats at the appropriate level for economic development and social justice under their jurisdiction. This has helped all the sections of the society particularly the weaker sections including women to take part and to share the responsibility of governance and development at least at the sub-district levels. When you talk about countries with highest number of female representation in the parliament, the quota system or 'reservation' seems to be a common factor behind more women in politics as legislators. For instance, while women dominate Rwanda's national legislature (thanks to the thirty percent quota for women in parliament and government), a 2014 electoral law in Bolivia required 50 percent of each political party's list be women. Similarly countries like Mexico, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, South Africa etc., too have legislated quotas that women are elected in their respective parliaments. As the legislation provides for reservation for women, the number of women elected representative at local level has sharply increased. India has been maintaining the record of number of women representatives at the panchayat level and statistics indicate that 30-50% of local level elected representatives are women.

## CURRENT MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK

India is the largest democracy in the world with a three layer governance structure: central government, state government and city/village government. The election to all these three is done by an independent body of Election Commission which is constituted separately at state and central level. At the national level, the head of government, prime minister, is elected by the members of Lok Sabha, lower house of the parliament of India. All members of Lok Sabha except two, who can be nominated by president of India, are directly elected through general elections which take place every five years, by universal adult suffrage. Unlike most of the other democracies of the world, India gave women voting right since the first election. Members of Rajya Sabha, upper house of Indian parliament, are elected by an Electoral college comprising of Members of Lok Sabha, elected members of the legislative assemblies of states and Union Territories of India. Similar structure is in place in various states of India with two bodies called Vidhan Sabha and Vidhan Parishad. Data of successive central and state elections show that Indian democracy is truly representative of women when it comes to their participation in elections but it significantly lacks women participation as legislature and executive.

**Application of Technology** The new government in India has a penchant for using technology for taking government schemes to the remote areas. The mobile penetration in India is even more than the penetration of electricity

connections. The digital communication advancements may be introduced to capture the actual participation of women in Panchayat activities by counting their attendance and their vote share in passing a decision in the Panchayat. Portals and mobile applications may be developed to voice the women issues by calling response from general women.

**5.2 Application of Analytics** Advanced analytics can be used to validate, cluster and segment data regarding women participation in local level politics. Big Data techniques have allowed policy planners to work with huge chunk of data which can be both quantitative as well as qualitative. Techniques like text mining and video mining can be utilized to extract meaningful information out of the huge data which can be in the form of recordings, documents and other information. Work has been started by the new government to use social media analytics for grass root development and gender issues can be incorporated into this framework.

**5.3 Development of Women Political Participation Score** The collection of data on women participation in politics is essential for policymakers. With lot of related and unrelated data, it becomes imperative to convert that information into an indicator which can be utilized for policy intervention. Data required for this task may include all the three aspects of political participation which are: women as electorate, women as elected representatives and women as policy makers. Other aspects of gender statistics can also be included as an input to give a holistic measure of women participation in that area.

### Key Issues and Analysis

- There are divergent views on the reservation policy. Proponents stress the necessity of affirmative action to improve the condition of women. Some recent studies on panchayats have shown the positive effect of reservation on empowerment of women and on allocation of resources.
- Opponents argue that it would perpetuate the unequal status of women since they would not be perceived to be competing on merit. They also contend that this policy diverts attention from the larger issues of electoral reform such as criminalization of politics and inner party democracy.
- Reservation of seats in Parliament restricts choice of voters to women candidates. Therefore, some experts have suggested alternate methods such as reservation in political parties and dual member constituencies.
- Rotation of reserved constituencies in every election may reduce the incentive for an MP to work for his constituency as he may be ineligible to seek re-election from that constituency.
- The report examining the 1996 women's reservation Bill recommended that reservation be provided for women of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) once the Constitution was amended to allow for reservation for OBCs. It also recommended that reservation be extended to the Rajya Sabha and the Legislative Councils. Neither of these recommendations has been incorporated in the Bill.

### Conclusion

A single score which can be weighted average of normalized version of different dimensions can be used for both budgeting and policy intervention purposes.

(1) All the States / UT Governments may impress upon Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to ensure the safety of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) / Female Sarpanches (elected village head), particularly those belonging to the weaker sections. They should not be physically harmed, assaulted or humiliated in any manner on any count. Discrimination of any kind against them should not be allowed to remain unheeded and resolved expeditiously.

(2) To put a curb on the cases of proxy attendance by relatives of women EWRs,

States have been advised to initiate departmental proceedings against the officers in whose presence such meetings are held.(3) To advise the concerned authorities of PRIs that meeting of Mahila Sabha / Palli Sabha (ladies con- gregation) be held prior to Gram Sabha Meeting (village meeting) and recommendations/ decisions of Mahila Sabhas mandatorily transmitted to Gram Sabhas who should consider the proposals imperatively.(4) In the quorum of Gram Sabha, inclusion of at least half of the number of women voters should be mandated. States which have not mandated such a provision should do so.(5) PRIs should be involved in any Integrated Plan of action to prevent and combat women trafficking, problems in disturbed areas, displacement due to land acquisition etc. Related matters may be taken up in Mahila Sabha in case of issues of children and women. The data on political participation of women is of immense use of planners and policy makers to evolve better schemes and programmes, which can be better implemented by women at local level. India has a rich history of measuring political participation of women since its independence. The decentralization of governance which is taking place for last two decades has increased the importance of measuring participation of women in decision making. Proper gender budgeting has already been worked out for inclusive growth of women & girls by ear-marking one third budget for the women in all the schemes. The Indian Government has a lot of emphasis on utilizing real time data for measuring different social indicators and using them for policy intervention. With more responsive data on women participation, better gender budget initiatives aim to move the country towards a gender equal society.

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