

## 10. Women's Empowerment in Politics and Representation

Dunghav A. D.

Dept. of - Political Science, Shankarrao Patil College Bhoom.

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### Introduction

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure. Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population but India has shown disproportionate sex ratio whereby female's population has been comparatively lower than males. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places. In the Western societies, the women have equal right and status with men in all walks of life. But gender disabilities and discriminations are found in India even today. The paradoxical situation has such that she was sometimes concerned as Goddess and at other times merely as slave.

Women empowerment may mean equal status to women, opportunity and freedom to develop her. The focus of empowerment is equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have a positive self-esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in the process of decision-making. Involvement of women in the political arena and in decision-making roles is an important tool for empowerment as well as monitoring standards of political performance." The application of the philosophical underpinnings of Jakarta Declaration are necessary, because in the countries where women have gained near equal representation such as in the Scandinavian countries, they have begun to alter the very nature of politics.



### Objectives

1. To know the need of Women Empowerment.
2. To assess the Awareness of Women Empowerment in India.
3. To analyze the Factors influencing the Economic Empowerment of Women.
4. To study the Government Schemes For Women Empowerment.
5. To identify the Hindrances in the Path of Women Empowerment.
6. To offer useful Suggestions in the light of Findings

### Why Need of Women Empowerment?

Reflecting into the "Vedas Purana" of Indian culture, women are being worshiped such as LAXMI MAA, goddess of wealth; SARSWATI MAA, for wisdom; DURGA MAA for power. The status of women in India particularly in rural areas needs to address the issue of empowering women. About 66% of the female population in rural area is unutilized. This is mainly due to existing social customs. In agriculture and Animal care the women contribute 90% of the total workforce. Women constitute almost half of the population, perform nearly 2/3 of its work hours, receive 1/10th of the world's income and own less than 1/ 100th the world property. Among the world's 900 million illiterate people, women outnumber men two to one. 70% of people living in poverty are women. Lower sex ratio i.e. 933, the existing studies show that the women are relatively less healthy than men though belong to same class. They constitute less than 1/7th of the administrators and managers in developing countries. Only 10% seats in World Parliament and 6% in National Cabinet are held by women.

### Status of Women Empowerment

The status of Women Empowerment cannot be visualized with single dimension rather multidimensional assessment in terms of various components of women's life and their status would bring a clear conception. So, this paper tries to give a basic idea about the condition and status of women in terms of employment, education, health and social status. Before going to elaborate separately let us have a quick view of the overall status of women in terms of gender gap index prepared by World Economic Forum in 2012.<sup>(1)</sup>

**Table 3: Details of Gender Gap Index – 2012 (Out of 135 Countries)**

| Gender Gap sub-Indices Rank            | India |        | SriLanka |        |
|--|-------|--------|----------|--------|
|  | Rank  | Score  | Rank     | Score  |
| Economic Participation and Opportunity | 123   | 0.4588 | 105      | 0.5596 |
| Educational Attainment                 | 121   | 0.8525 | 108      | 0.9946 |
| Health and Survival                    | 134   | 0.9612 | 1        | 0.9796 |
| Political Empowerment                  | 17    | 0.3343 | 22       | 0.3151 |
| Overall Index                          | 105   | 0.6442 | 39       | 0.7122 |

Source: World Economic Forum (2012) Global Gender Gap Index – 2012.



### Women and Political Participation

Participation in the local government institutions has been viewed as essential in promoting women's consciousness and development at the local level as well as in training them for participation in the wider politics. Democratic thinkers have generally linked liberty to the people by the process of political participation. Participation is maximised in local government because, "local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they put it within people's reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it."<sup>2)</sup> When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted on 10<sup>th</sup> 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, "every one is entitled to all the rights and freedoms without distinction of sex." It is considered as a clarion call for the cause of women empowerment.

### Women and Politics in India

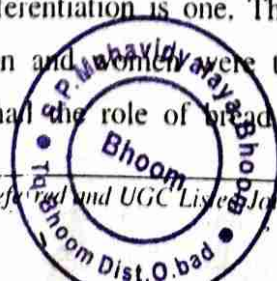
The Indian society is full of paradoxes. On the one hand, foreigners come in hordes to our country in search of spiritual solace but on the other hand, Indians rank among the most corrupt people in the world. Again, on the one hand, India is spending billions, nay, billions to send satellites to space to prove its scientific prowess but on the other the state cannot provide almost half the population with the basic necessities of food, education, health and shelter.

The same paradox exists in the case of women too. On the one hand, the scriptures put them on a high pedestal. An old Sanskrit proverb is that, where the women are held in reverence there do the gods reside. 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.<sup>3)</sup>

Demographically, according to the 2001 census, total population of the country was 102.70 cores. Out of this 49.5% were females. That is nearly 50% of the population. According to 1901 census, the sex ratio of females (per 1000 males) was 979 and according to the 2001 census, it has declined to 933. This declining trend is because of the apathy towards the girl child. In fact in 1991 the sex ratio had decreased to 927 and thereafter there was a slight improvement in 2001.

### Status of Women in Early Indian Society

Every human society is invariably characterized by social differentiations. Amongst such differentiations, gender based differentiation is one. This has been relatively non-specific in earlier societies. Accordingly men and women were treated differently. They were assigned different roles and status. Men had the role of bread earning and protection of women and





children. Women had the role of reproduction of heirs and home-making. Historical records show that the position of Indian women varied through the ages. A historical understanding of status of women in early Indian society shows a declining trend in the position of women.

In the age between 1500BC to 500BC there was a gradual decline in the level of female education. System of sending girls to famous teachers or centers of education was discouraged. Only male relatives like father, brother could teach them. There was a tendency to curtail religious rights and privileges of women. But women had honorable position in the household and she could move freely in the family and society.<sup>4)</sup>

In the history of Indian society, the age of Jainism and Buddhism are considered as a little progressive to previous times. Women enjoyed a bit of freedom and certain opportunity, particularly in spiritual matters. During this time, female education was encouraged. It was possible that women could become missionaries and even they could remain unmarried. However, in the 'Jataka' books of Buddhists, women were criticized as evils, thieves, unreliable and wild. According to Buddhism, woman can reach the highest stage, she is, however inferior to men.<sup>5)</sup> The historical analysis of the position of women in ancient India shows that women did not share an equal position with men. Women were recognized only as wives and mothers. Their position was as subordinate to men. The later movements like Buddhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism, Veerashaivism and Sikhism made certain efforts to improve the status of women. The Bakhti movement allowed women to undertake spiritual activities independently. It is the 18th century that is considered to be the darkest period in the status of women, where women were subjected to male superiority in all fields.

### Women in India's Freedom Struggle

The Swadeshi Movement in 1905 saw the entry of women into independence movement. It also marked the formulation of several women's organizations. The entry of Annie Besant into Indian politics in 1914 accelerated the process of women's associations with the freedom struggle. She was the first woman to be elected as president of the Indian National Congress. Sarojini Naidu too became active in Indian National Movement.

It is M. K Gandhi who drew large number of women into the freedom struggle. The participation of women in India's historic freedom struggle was a country wide phenomena, their participation in a large scale was linked closely with the advent of Gandhi on the Indian political scene from 1917 onwards. In response to Gandhi's call large number of women plunged into the national movement. His message "when women, we call abala became sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful", reveals the importance he gave for the strength of women.<sup>6)</sup> The national movement brought women to the centre stage. From liberal homes and conservative



families, urban centers and rural districts, women single and married, young and old came forward and joined against colonial rule. Their involvement is extremely important, women's participation called into question the British right to rule, legitimized the Indian National Movement and won for activist women, at for a time the approval of Indian men.<sup>7)</sup>

During the Non-Cooperation Movement, women in different parts of India joined processions and propagated the use of khadi (spun cotton) and charakha (spinning wheel). Vijayalaxmi Pandit, Renuka Ray, Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi and Kasthuba Gandhi played an important role in the boycott of foreign goods. In the Bardoli Satyagraha of 1922-24, women turned out in large numbers. In Bardoli Satyagraha of 1928, women gradually outnumbered men in political gatherings. Maniben Patel and Bakti Desai fixed their tents on the land declared to be sold by the government.

#### **Participation of Women in Post Independent Period**

On attaining Independence in the year 1947, India became a republic. The Constitution of India adopted a parliamentary form of government. The government functions at different levels. At the apex level, there is the national government and governments at states and union territories. At the centre, the parliament consists of two houses i.e. the Upper House called the Rajya Sabha or the council of states and the Lower House called the Lok Sabha (House of People). At the state level, the upper house is called the Legislative Council and the Lower House is called the Legislative Assembly. Each state has its own local self governments known as Panchayati Raj Institutions both at urban and rural areas. Rural Panchayati Raj Institution has three tier structures consisting of the Zilla Panchayat at the district level, Taluka Panchayat at the taluka level, and Gram Panchayat at the village level. The Constitution of India, one of the greatest documents ever produced came into force in the year 1950 guarantee justice, liberty and equality to all citizens. The preamble of the Constitution of India resolved to secure to all its citizens justice, social, economic and political, liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith, and to worship, equality of status and opportunity and to promote among them fraternity assuring the dignity of individual and the unity of nation.

#### **Women Voters**

Registered women voters in India have increased from 45% in the 1951 elections to 47.6% in the 2014 elections, that is, by a pitiful 2.7%. The general trend has been an increase in the total number of voters each year, but the percentage of men and women voting has remained almost constant, with men forming more than 52% of the electorate. This means that in 2014, in absolute numbers, there are 38,740,183 more men than women in the electorate. This gap is only magnified if we look at the actual percentage of votes polled by women. The trend for



all the past years shows that this is less than the percentage of registered women voters. In 2009, 47.7% registered women voters accounted for 45.8% of the total votes polled. Moreover, the electoral data from 2014 shows that the percentage of new women voters in the 18-19 years age category is only 41.4%. 51 states and Union Territories fall below the national average in this age group, with Haryana having the lowest percentage at 28.3%. Only Nagaland has more female electors than male among the new electorate, at 50.4%.

Women in India are much better represented in the Panchayati Raj Institutions as compared to the Parliament. As per the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, in 2008 the Gram Panchayats had 37.8% women members, the Intermediate Panchayats 37% women members and the District Panchayats 35.3% women members. The total representation of women in all three tiers of the Panchayat amounted to 36.87%. This seems to the Indian Constitution, mandating at least 1/3rd of the seats in all tiers of the Panchayat. A further Amendment to the proposed in 2009, increasing the reservation to 50%, but was not passed. Some states such as Bihar have 50% reservation for women in the Panchayati Rajas per the State Legislation, but not all the states in India have adopted similar legislations<sup>9</sup>.

### Conclusion

Women's empowerment is not a Northern concept women all over the world, including countries in South, have been challenging and changing gender inequalities since the beginning of the history. These struggles have also been supported by many men who have been outraged at injustice against women. Women represent half the world's population and gender inequality exists in every nation on the planet. Until women are given the same opportunities that men are, entire societies will be destined to perform below their true potentials. The greatest need of the hour is change of social attitude to women. The low representation of women in parliament and state assemblies has been the major concern of various women organizations. Women constituting nearly half of the population have to abide by the decisions taken by men in power. No serious efforts have been made by political parties to give more representation for women. Representation of women in legislatures, thereby entering into power position is inevitable for political empowerment and equality of women.

It is hoped that before long a consensus may emerge on the issue of women's reservation among political parties of India and women will get their rightful place in central and state law-maker bodies. An extensive and detailed study on women's representation in the legislatures of both developing and developed countries has brought out the truth that India's record in providing adequate representation to women in legislative bodies, though not satisfactory, is far better and hence cannot be called dismal.

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**PRINCIPAL**  
S.P. Mahavidyalaya, Bhoom  
Dist. Osmanabad