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POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA: A MYTH

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ABSTRACT

Plato, the father of western political philosophy may be considered the first feminist as he rescued ‘woman’ from her traditional child bearing and care giving roles. He portrayed them as ‘philosopher queens’ and solicited their services to the state. Several waves of feminism led to the recognition of civil, political and social rights of women but women empowerment across space and time has been ineffective in all senses of the term.

The current paper focuses on the dismal participation of women in Indian politics – whether it is their nomination and election as people’s representatives across the federal spectrum of India or designating them important portfolios in the executive. Further, it will look at the negligible appearance of women in the judiciary. It will also highlight the lax attitude towards bills concerning women empowerment like the 33% reservation in Parliament and the patriarchal attitude on bills that give women a status equal to men – right to property, triple talak, reproductive rights etc. Despite the constitutional reservation for women in the 73rd and 74th amendment acts, ‘Panch Pati’ is a well-known phenomenon. Assault on women officers is commonplace and the National Commission on Women is no more than a ‘toothless tiger’.

Part 3, fundamental right to equality (Article 14-18) makes the genders equal but that’s theory. Dr. Ambedkar said that the progress of a society is measured by the progress of its women. By that standard, India is far from being an equitable and developed society.

Keywords: Feminism, Women Empowerment, Political Participation.

INTRODUCTION

“I am not the woman president of Harvard, I am the president of Harvard.”¹

These words of Dr. Drew Gilpin Faust reflect the level of awe that common people get struck with when they see positions of power and prestige being occupied by “the second gender”. And this is not an isolated incident rather it is the symptom of systemic marginalisation that society has subjected our women to. Smt. Indira Gandhi being the first “woman” prime minister and Smt. Pratibha Patil being the first “woman” president of India is a more noteworthy fact rather than they simply being the prime minister or the president of world’s most populous democracy.

Here, we bring ancient India into the picture. India, since the early Vedic age (Rig Vedic period) has had republican democratic traditions. The Rig Vedic polity had democratic institutions like Sabha and Samiti, the political assemblies of the people, where men and women participated on equal footing.²

Over centuries several stereotypes crept into the system leading to erosion of this equitable social fabric. Women lack rationality, women are weak, women must look after the household, women need to be protected (controlled) are some of the prejudices that we have all heard, and as women been victim of.

Physiological ‘sexual’ difference (primarily, child bearing role) has manifested into her confinement at home for a very long time, consequentially translating into her limited social evolution. As household responsibilities are thrust upon her, she naturally retreats from economic and political participation and these spheres that were naturally open to both/ all sexes, have become male dominated. Here, we shall examine the poor participation of women on the Indian political scenario.

¹ <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2018/2/8/the-woman-president/>

² <https://panaceaconcept.in/sabha-samiti-and-vidhata/>



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DIMENSIONS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Aristotle, the father of political science had made a strong case for civic participation in his theory of citizenship. It was his idea that ‘full citizenship’ entails participation of the person (he excluded women from his class of citizens) in the affairs of the state – law making and law adjudication.³

In broad sense of the term, political participation involves the entire range of activities that govern the interrelation between people and government and people and people. (Personal is political)

Prima facie, it includes the right to vote and the right to contest elections on public offices. Further, it includes the ability to be heard in public consultations (political consciousness) and to stand in protest against the ruling class. (political activism) In modern times, Gandhi may be safely assumed to be the pioneer of women politics in India as he called on the Indian women to take part in the Civil Disobedience movement.⁴ Madras, became the first state to grant suffrage rights to women in 1921, albeit limited to the propertied elite. Universal suffrage became a reality only in 1950 after the enactment of Indian constitution.⁵

Things are bright on paper as the constitution, through the fundamental right to equality (Article 14-18), blurs the gender based distinction in political and economic sphere. However, this theoretical equality is mocked by the social realities of India.

BARRIERS TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Several factors inhibit an effective participation of women in politics.

• Political Factors –

- The political atmosphere in the country is grim when we talk of women participation. It is far from being ‘encouraging’ and is rather ‘repulsive.’ Evidence stems from the fact that the 33% Women reservation bill, for reservation in the Lower houses of the Parliament and each state assembly has been in limbo for decades. The said bill is pending since 1996 indicating at the sheer lack of willingness to yield policy making space to women.⁶
- According to research by Association for Democratic Reforms, only 9% of the 50000 candidates fielded in the 2019 general and state assembly elections were women.⁷ It further said that India ranks 142 out of 193 countries in Women in National Parliament ranking.⁸
- Even as the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment acts made 1/3rd seats reserved for women at all levels of grass root democracy, the phenomenon of ‘Panch Pati’ is a reality.
- Discrimination by Political Parties – Several national and regional political parties have their women members running in millions along with several thousand party workers. Despite their loyal services to the agenda of the party, parties fail to field them as candidates when elections are round the corner. Lathika Subhash, a member of Kerala INC shaved off her head as a mark of protest against side lining of women.⁹

• Social Factors

- Literacy - Women have been relegated to a secondary social position as a ‘norm’. This means their general literacy level is lower as compared to the male counterpart. Thus, they have scarce access to relevant political information and in case information is available, they often lack the faculties needed to process it.
- Familial Support - Several women who are elected in political positions face the double burden of looking after their families as any lapse in ‘home making’ role invites a flurry of criticism. A significant number of women do not participate at all as that would cost the time devoted to household work. Further, a few liberal households cannot afford the threat to a woman’s modesty when she becomes a public figure – whether physical or trolling.
- Proxy Participation – In the third tier of Indian governance, where women representation in constitutionally mandated, it is often the women of the politically active households, that contest the elections. Further, the real wielders of decision-making power are the male patriarchs of the house. It has also been noted that while the numbers of women participation as voters and

³ <https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/political-science/aristotles-theory-of-citizenship-and-slavery/40125>

⁴ <https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/features/the-women-who-heeded-gandhi-s-call-1554530300409.html>

⁵ <https://zeenews.india.com/india/voting-rights-in-india-how-the-country-arrived-at-the-concept-of-universal-suffrage-2393489.html>

⁶ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/25-years-on-bill-seeking-33-women-in-parliament-awaits-nod-101631387888722.html>

⁷ <https://adrindia.org/content/only-9-women-mlas-mps-across-india-2019-says-adr-report>

⁸ <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=5&year=2022>. accessed on 23rd June 2022.

⁹ <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/kerala-assembly-polls-2021/story/denied-party-ticket-kerala-mahila-congress-chief-lathika-subhash-resigns-shaves-head-in-protest-1779246-2021-03-14>



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policy makers show a positive trend, the trend conceals the influence that men exercise on women while casting or not casting a vote and running or not running an election contest.

- Lack of experience – Women typically lack leadership experience as they have rarely been in such a position at home and work. This also leads to a negative perception that women particularly do not make good leaders.
- Other discrimination – Women representation has also been skewed in the favour of upper class, rich privileged women. It is nearly impossible for a poor dalit woman to break the social clutches and rise the ladder of political power. Dalit and scheduled caste women face the most severe discrimination when they run for public offices. They face abuses. They are denied information and are often neglected and silenced.
- **Economic Factors**
 - Women are less educated and are discriminated in work places by being paid lesser wages than men. Naturally, their incomes and savings are low, and they have even lower agency over how that money is spent. Today, when money is a factor of win-ability, it is difficult for women to compete with men who mostly earn more and often are sponsored by parties. Social limitations as listed above hinder their ability to campaign for funds.

As these factor overlap and interplay, participation of women in politics becomes more difficult than it sounds.

The following table summarizes the performance of India on Global Gender Gap Index published by World Economic Forum in terms of political empowerment, in the years 2020¹⁰ and 2021.¹¹

S.NO.	PARAMETER	2020	2021	REMARKS
	NO. OF COUNTRIES COVERED	153	156	
	WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT (WORLD)	26.1%	25%	Decline
	WOMEN MINISTERS (WORLD)	22.6%	21%	Decline
	INDIA'S OVERALL RANK	112	140	Rank fell 28 places
	INDIA'S RANK IN POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT	18	51	Worst Performance

The 2021 report concludes that the gender gap in Political Empowerment remains the largest of the four heads tracked by World Economic Forum.

Some notable facts given in the report include –

- As of 15th January 2021, 81 countries have never had a woman head of state.
- 85 states have not had a woman head of state in the last 50 years.

JS MILL ON POLITICAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN

“The Legal subordination of one sex to another is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement, and that it ought to be replaced by perfect equality, admitting no privilege on one side and disability on the other.”

It is often said that if anyone is liberal, it is Mill. Mill is the first modern political philosopher (after Plato), who talked of equal political rights for women, including the right to vote, in his work, 'The Subjection of Women'.¹²

He believed that since every individual is the best judge of his interests, he must be allowed to make his own decisions. He believed that everyone should have the right to vote with the exception of barbarians and uneducated. He said, women like men, should be allowed to vote to defend their own rights and to stand on their own feet morally and intellectually. Thus, even women must be welcomed to civic participation.¹³

According to Mill, it was the religious hierarchical views of the society that men were considered superior to women bases on biological determinism. He further said that inequality of women was a relic of the past, where might is right and had no place in

¹⁰ <https://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2020/the-global-gender-gap-index-2020/performance-by-subindex/>

¹¹ https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf, pg 11.

¹² https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/The_Subjection_of_Women/V6UA_paHtQQC?hl=en&gbpv=0

¹³ <https://wysu.org/content/commentary/john-stuart-mill-womens-rights>



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the modern world. Women suffrage in his view was vital as political policies affect women too. He was of the view men had no prerogative to deny women her rights to self-development and excellence, pointing towards Queens Elizabeth I and Victoria.

He considered it a paradox that women were being denied liberty equality and justice on the private sphere. He condemned the fact that women were still slaves of the whims of their male relatives. From the utilitarian perspective also, he asserted the benefit that humanity/ society (greater intellectual development) would derive from women's contribution to politics.

As a member of the Parliament, he even presented a bill for women suffrage in the legislature. Though it was not passed, feminist thinker Susan Moller Okin, said Mill to have contributed greatly to champion the women right to vote.

CONCLUSION

Politics (both domestic and international) has been largely dominated by men. Including women in politics, is not just right but necessary. To say, it has both instrumental and intrinsic value.

It is right because women are equal humans and thus simply deserve to be heard in decisions that affect them. Including women is also essential. It helps to diversify and democratise social and political issues. They are active participants in family and community life and thus understand issues of the common people. A paper by United Nations argued that when women are adequately represented there are better economic outcomes through less corruption, lesser crimes and they are less vulnerable to political opportunism. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. The UN says that goal 5 is integral to the achievement of all other goals.¹⁴

In order to get rid of guided political participation of women in India and to give them actual voice, some suggestions are awareness of their civil and political rights, information on procedures be made available in timely manner. Parties must take upon themselves this responsibility to include women faces in their nomination lists and give them suitable portfolio as they get elected. This must be accentuated by support from peers and self-motivation to serve the people.

The Indian Parliament has shown a positive trend in the past few years as more women candidates enter the Lok Sabha and are designated to portfolios like defence, foreign affairs, finance and education.

¹⁴ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>