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Md Anarul Islam
Research Scholar,
Maharishi University
Information & Technology,
Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh,
India.

Dr. Madhuri Dubey
(Phd in Political Science)
Maharishi University
Information & Technology,
Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh,
India.

Correspondence
Md Anarul Islam
Research Scholar,
Maharishi University
Information & Technology,
Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh,
India.

Women's political participation and representation in India

Md Anarul Islam, Dr. Madhuri Dubey

Abstract

A clear cut zonal variation in all parameters of awareness and action were observed under dissimilar zone, besides drudgery and illiteracy, lack of access to the information was one of the major factors for poor awareness of politics. Only 22.79 percent women listen daily news through radio and Television; just 6.06 percent read news study each day. Besides these the socio economic setup, poverty, accessibility, proximity to the cities and plain areas and less importance given to the women by political parties and candidates are the other major factors for their Political awareness. The 2014 Indian General Elections for the 16th Lok Sabha will conclude on May 12, 2014. Given that our new Parliament will be entrusted with raising women's concerns and safeguarding their interests, it is important at this time to analyze the status of Indian women in political participation and representation.

Keywords: Political, Indian, women, participation, awareness, Representation.

1. Introduction

The participation of women and their engagement in electoral method is an important marker of the maturity and efficacy of democracy in any country. It can be defined not only in terms of the impartiality and freedom with which they share political power with men, but also in terms of the liberty and space provided for women in the democratic framework of electoral politics. The Constitution of India promulgated in 1952 promised, "to secure to all its peoples justice, social, economic and political" and "impartiality of status and of opportunity" [1-4]. Despite the constitutional promulgation, women in the Indian subcontinent continue to be grossly under-represented in the legislatures, both at the national and the state levels. Female representation in the lower house (Lok Sabha) of the Indian Parliament is still much less than the world average of 20%, lower than the "critical mass" required introducing sex parity in political decision-making and legislation. Similarly, the number of female representatives in legislative bodies in most of the states in India is also below the 20% mark reflecting a pan-Indian sex exclusion from electoral participation and quality representation. It will also attempt to ascertain the best indicators that explain higher participation of women in formal politics, both as single participatory voters and as multi-participatory campaigners that are more time intensive and require frequent negotiations outside the household. Probes factors that act as barriers and obstacles in female participation and women's issues in electoral politics qualitatively

2. Review of Literature

(i) Participatory Levels in Electoral Competition

This can be estimated by analyzing the turnout of women as voters and the representation of women in the lower house of Parliament over a period of time based on time series data from the Election Commission of India's archives. This would be supplemented by a comparative analysis of seats allotted to women by national political parties during the last three general elections in India [5].

(ii) Electoral Behavior and Attitudes

The level of political awareness, commitment and involvement of participation of women in electoral politics, their autonomy and independence in electoral behavior and choices and

barriers that act as impediments in participating as active campaigners during the elections. As will be discussed in the relevant section, the data for analysis is drawn from the Data Unit of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi.

(iii) Efficacy of Women in Electoral Method

An assessment would be made of women's roles and efficiency in the electoral method and society's attitude to new political roles of women. This is indicated by the success of women candidates in elections, the efficiency of women's movements, the nature of leadership and women elected in government and political parties and the result in terms of campaigns for women's mobilization, particularly on issues that directly concern them. Since quantitative data is not available to ascertain the efficacy of women in electoral method, it will be more qualitative and based on sex analysis. Since empirical data for women's participation in electoral competition in India is mostly available for state and national level elections, grass-roots electoral participation will be analyzed in a qualitative manner so as to provide a holistic picture about levels and patterns of participation in electoral competition.

2.1. Women Political Participation in Indian Politics

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 household 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 Patel. In the present central government, women comprise roughly quarter of the Indian cabinet with portfolios like external affairs, commerce and human resource development [6]. At the ground level, India has a significant proportion of women in local level politics which has been achieved by reserving seat for women [7].

2.2. Indian Freedom Movement

Women participated in the freedom movement with true spirit and undaunted courage and faced various tortures, exploitations and hardships to earn us freedom. Many great Indian women like Rani Lakshmi Bai, Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Vijayalakmi Pundit, and Annie Besant need no introduction for their dedication and undying devotion to the service of India. Indian women who joined the national movement were initially from educated and liberal families. All changed with the advent of Gandhi who converted the freedom struggle into a mass movement involving all sections of society [8]. 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.

2.3. 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 systems, viz, panchayats (village governance bodies) at the village, intermediate and district levels in each 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 [9]. 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. 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 [10].

2.4. Women in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha

The 15th Lok Sabha in India (2009) comprised 61 women members, only 11.2% of the total Lok Sabha membership. While it has increased from 9.02% in 1999, it is almost half of the world average of 22.2%. The Rajya Sabha does not fare much better, with 27 women members comprising 11.5% of the total membership in 2013.2 Again, while this is an improvement from the 1999 figure of 7.76%, it is far below the world average of 19.6%. It comes as no surprise then that India is ranked 111th in the World Rankings of Women in national parliaments, compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union. India's rank is one of the lowest in the region, and falls below her neighbours. Nepal ranked at 36, Afghanistan at 41, China at 61, Pakistan at 72 and Bangladesh at 74.



Fig 1: Percentage of women in national parliaments

2.5. Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions

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 Raj as per the State Legislation, but not all the states in India have adopted similar legislations ^[11].

2.5.1 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.

Women's Participation in the Lok Sabha Elections

Year	Voters				Votes polled by women	
	Men	Women	Voters	% women	from total voters (%)	from registered women voters (%)
2004	34,94,90,864	32,19,97,066	67,14,87,930	47.95	44.4	53.6
2009	37,47,58,801	34,22,26,300	71,69,85,101	47.73	45.8	55.8
2014	42,66,51,513	38,79,11,330	81,45,91,184	47.62	NA	NA

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%. 15 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%.

3. Conclusion

The performance of women as elected representatives and chair persons has proved beyond the shadow of doubt that they are not behind men in administrative skills, organizational capacities and political insights which were hitherto considered the monopoly of men. The new surge in women's empowerment and awakening bid well for the nation which in the near future may allot more seats to women in State and Central Legislatures. Women's clamour for one-third reservation of seats in the state and national legislatures may meet with success before long. Anyway, all the political parties though dominated by menfolk have agreed up on the idea that women should get reservation in legislatures though there is disagreement on the percentage of reservation. 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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