

Women's Political Participation and Share in Political Power Through Decision-Making.

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An attempt will be made in this paper to study the problem in a micro perspective vis-à-vis the evolving situation in India through the constitutional amendments relating to panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) adding thereby a third tier in the functioning of parliamentary democracy constitutionalising reservation of not less than one-third of the total number of seats for women in PRIs in the country. We begin by stating the issues involved in power and authority, and then in subsequent sections the inhibiting factors, changes in the situation, and the emerging situation are proposed to be dealt with. Then we take up the role of women in PRIs and state our conclusions.

I

Traditional views of political behaviour as generally, practised have it that politics is what usually takes place in a male-dominated 'public' sphere of life and hence, the 'private' sphere of life is feminine, meaning thereby that in the so-called private domestic sphere of women, it is the 'private' responsibility of women to contribute free labour for basic social maintenance, i.e., household management and work, and reproduction. All this, however, is changing fast at least on paper practically in all countries under the impact of modernisation even with recognised variations in the economy, and due to compelling reasons for social change. It is interesting in this connection to note that as against the generally practiced view in a male-dominated society, a contrary view was put forward that 'women may be able to design societies without dominance, because they lack the experience of dominating'. It is, of course, subject to making available to the womankind the rights they are lawfully entitled to.

Privileges die hard. Those already having authority always try to maintain and strengthen it with all justification they can command. Economic power and authority give the right to control both production and distribution of resources. Political power and authority enable wielders of power to control or influence decisions in a host of matters. Although political and economic power can and often do operate separately, political power in a modern state exercises a good deal of, economic power. Economic power combined with political power could lead to changes in the situation.'

Gender inequality continues to prevail despite legal and constitutional provisions. Under India's Constitution, sex equality in public employment and public office is assured. Article 39(d) & (e) lay down that the State shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing (d) that there is equal pay for equal work for both men and women; (e) that the health and strength of workers, men and women, and the tender age of children are not abused and that citizens are not forced by economic necessity to enter vocations unsuited to their age or strength. Article 42 enjoins on the State to provide for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief. Unfortunately, a wide gulf divides promises from practices mainly or even solely due to absence of real power-sharing between the male and female halves of the situation.

There is, however, tokenism. A few women have scaled to the heights of power and senior positions. They are usually placed in the position of representing the womankind. But token women hardly make any real difference to the situation of inequity. Women do enjoy formal rights, whereas the reality is that almost everywhere they still exist in subordination. Tokenism is not an index of equality in status. A woman's individuality or independent personality is hardly recognised. Vinoba Bhave put in very succinctly: 'Today, we cannot see any woman's influence upon society. Today women have not been able to attain any individual personality. Today they cannot live with freedom. Therefore, they are introduced as someone's wife or someone's sister. Now women are accorded some privileges. ... They have the same legal status as sons. ... They may work on an equality with men. They have been granted all these rights, but this is not going to uplift them. He thought, saintly as he was, that women could advance only when they attain the right to spirituality. But such a 'right' has only ephemeral existence because of the politics, and politics of economics of modern-day life.

Women's participation in the political process has been retarded by a number of inhibiting factors for which they themselves are not responsible. They do not have their own spokespersons in the representative bodies of the State on a footing of equality with men. The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (TOWARDS EQUALITY, 1974) pointed out how the political parties are not free 'from the general prejudices and attitudes of the society' and how they have tended 'to see the women voters and citizens as appendages of males and have depended on the heads of families to provide block-voters and support for their parties and candidates'. The Shramshakti Report said that 'the political elite itself is part of the economic and social elites' and that 'the financing of electoral politics and political parties comes from the economically powerful groups'. It was rightly apprehended that if inequality of class (economic situation), status (social position) and political power were allowed to continue, women, although numerically not constituting a minority, 'the large masses of women in India may well emerge as the only surviving minority community exposed to injustice'.

II

Gandhiji's contribution to women's mobilisation during the struggle for independence was very significant. Gandhi accepted a greater public role for women, encouraged as he was by the sacrifices made by women in satyagraha programmes. He said: 'To me domestic slavery of women is a symbol of barbarism Domestic work should not take up the whole of a woman's life'. He thought that a woman's household work cannot be taken for granted; it did not have priority over her duty to the society at large. He also believed that men and women should have equal rights to property. Yet, the Mahatma was less specific about women's power to the extent of sharing power either in public life or in the family. Women participated in a massive way in the freedom struggle and in post-independence mass movements: But whenever the question of political participation in the representative bodies comes up, women are always neglected. Traditional male-dominated society has been used to exclusion of women from policy formulation and decision-making fora. Women have been considered to be fit only for welfare programmes, not development programmes at their decision-making levels.

Women's political participation does not mean participation only in the electoral and administrative processes. It is important that in the formulation of all plans and programmes of social relevance, women's active involvement is ensured. Political participation should include involvement in any form of organised activity that seek to influence attitudes and behaviour of decision-makers: in fact, women should form part of the decision-makers for any development to be meaningful.

The UNESCO Seminar on Participation of Women in Politics (Lisbon, 1983) defined political participation as the involvement / engagement in organised deliberative activity that seek to influence / alter the character / functioning of the structure / the policies or the power process. ... Thus, attempts at removing barriers to socially useful activities should also be viewed as political participation. Most of the popular movements fall in this category. Activities leading to rejection / opting out the isolation from the political process cannot normally be described as participation.

The UNESCO Seminar also gave a list of obstacles on the path of political participation. Authoritarian regimes and absence of continuous democratic process are such obstacles. As women bear the main responsibility for the process of socialisation of the new generation, women suffer more when deliberate obstacles are created. It is for conscious women's movements to assert their rights. Political education encourages participation and the first step in this direction is eradication of illiteracy. An overwhelming majority of women work in the informal sector. Their conditions of life and work have become more uncertain due to the impact of the new economic policy. Political participation ought to embrace this large category of women workers along with organised sections of the community.

Political life has become vitiated with communalism, scams and scandals and mounting corruption. It is the responsibility of both academic centres and activist organizations to create a climate of opinion in favour of a cleaner society. At times, and more often, things have got to proceed from the grassroots level to confront bureaucratic callousness.

III

The Constitution 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts have provided for, among other things, reservation of not less than one-third of the total number of seats for women in PRIs in the country. This has not come easily. A long series of debates on the issue of women's representation elected bodies, efforts made by the women's movement, impact of the process of modernisation, and changing values of political culture have made it possible.

The TOWARDS EQUALITY report noted how the Committee on the Status of Women in India received demands from a number of women's associations in several states of the country pleading for a system of reservation for women in the legislative bodies in States and in Parliament. The arguments in favour of

reservation were : (i) That the declining trend in women's representation was the result of the reluctance of political parties to sponsor women candidates barring a policy of 'tokenism' of having a few women candidates which, however, offers real obstacles in making the few legislators act as spokes- persons for women's rights and opportunities; (ii) that in a situation of political parties reflecting the established values of a male dominated society, certain structural changes in the socio-political set-up were necessary to make room for desirable social change ; otherwise 'losing faith in the political process to change their condition of life', women might 'opt out of the political system and become either passive partners or rebels' ; (iii) that a system of reservation of a proportion of seats for women in elected bodies would have the path for a 'fairer deal to nearly half the population in the various units of government' ; and, (iv) that a system of reservation could increase the women legislators' sense of responsibility and concern for women-specific problems, and that this would lead to increasing mobilisation of women both in the electorate and within the political parties. Social scientists associated with the Committee also held the view that improvements in the political status of women constituted an integral aspect of the over-all problem of socio-economic change and 'broadening the political elite structure'. It was pointed out very forcefully that a '30 per cent reservation of seats in the legislative bodies will alter the very character of our legislature and will compel the political parties to change their strategies and tactics and induce them to give women their due..? There was also opposition to the suggestion for reservation of seats for women from the side of representatives of political parties and 'most women legislators'. Some of the privileged women legislators did not like to be equated with the socially backward communities since 'all women do not suffer from the same disabilities as these underprivileged groups'. Some political parties did not object to reservation of seats for women in local bodies on the ground that certain precedents in this regard were already existing. The Report of the Committee itself noted as compared to the situation obtaining before independence when with a system of reservation women constituted 3.3 per cent of the membership of the central legislature, the average proportion of women in Parliament since 1952 without reservation has been roughly 4 per cent.

The 'Towards Equality' Committee rejected the suggestion for a system of reservation for women to State Assemblies and Parliament. However, it made the following recommendations on the subject of women's representation: (i) The establishment of Statutory Women's Panchayats at the village level to ensure greater participation by women in the political process.

These bodies are not meant to be parallel organisations to the Gram Panchayats but should form an integral part of the Panchayati Raj structure, with autonomy and resources of their own for the management and administration of welfare and development programmes for women and children'.

(ii) Since at the level of municipalities the principle of reservation of seats for women was already there in certain States, it was recommended that this should be adopted by all States as transitional measure.

(iii) Political parties should adopt a definite policy regarding percentage of women candidates to be sponsored by them for elections to Parliament and State Assemblies. 'While they may initially start with 15 per cent, this should be gradually increased so that in time to come the representation of women in the Legislative Bodies has some relationship to their position in the total population of the country or the State'.

(iv) The inclusion of women in all important committees, commissions or delegations that are appointed to examine socio-economic problems .° Reservation of seats for women in PRIs has gone much beyond the terms of the 'Towards Equality' Committee's recommendations. PRI reservations will establish a new balance in the male female divide in the socio-political process. It is a big step forward in the process of a social revolution, if it were acted upon seriously and with the political will to discharge responsibilities. But power sharing in the political process has got to go much beyond the PRI level. To ensure equality in the decision-making process, the time has come now to provide representation for women appropriately in all elective bodies bearing relationship to their position in the total population of the country as a whole. Although ours is a virtually centralised federation, power-sharing in our parliamentary democracy was hitherto confined to the Centre and the States. Now that the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts have constitutionalised the PRI, a third tier to our system has been added. The third tier of our democratiip system at and below the district level need not be e supplicant in that it has become a constitutionalised unit of local self-government. Democratic decentralisation ought to acquire its due importance in the change situation. A radical change in our constitutional behaviour is called for. Even now, a case exists for a rational sharing of powers between the Centre and the States, restructuring of Centre-State relations. About a decade back, a scholar suggested that to do away with half-way measures, at the level of local governments, also the cabinet form of government should be introduced in order to 'get out of the vicious circle in which we seem to have been caught.'° This is a radical suggestion and deserves to be discussed in the overall framework of our constitutional structure.

PRI reservation of seats for women is decidedly an advance. But for effective political participation of women in the decision making process, proper representation of women in all elective bodies up to Parliament reflecting their position in the total population of the country has got to be ensured. Will there be enough women available for the positions? There does not seem to be any ground for doubts in this regard.

After two decades... After two decades implementation of 1/3 reservations of women (Some States like Andhra Pradesh is concerned 50% reserved for women) in PRI male domination is continued, we conducted a survey in Godavari's Districts of Andhra Pradesh). The hypothesis formed for the purpose of the study are found to be adequately supported by the data. Though the universe of the study is limited to the 4 districts in Andhra Pradesh of India, the observations largely provide extrapolation of the same to the other regions. Heterogeneity is inherent in the entire Indian territory for the society itself is vertically stratified. As such the findings of this particular study are to a great extent in agreement with the observations of the scholars on women in India.

The observations of the field study are:

1. Institutional arrangement in the form of reservation policy is the prime source of motivation for women to seek entry into politics.
2. Institutional arrangement in the form of family as a support structure is crucial for women to contemplate active political participation.
3. Patronage from political parties is essential for an individual to seek legislative recruitment.
4. Spouse encouragement is a pre-condition for women to aspire for a public role.
5. Social norms are noticed to be the primary reason for women to fail as effective legislators.
6. Communication between women and other legislators during the deliberations is highly formal and nominal.
7. Majority of women are not conversant about either the structure or the functioning of the government in which they are members.
8. Though the majority of women in their public roles perceived the spouse role as sharing of their responsibilities, they are becoming proxies to their husbands in performing their public role. Without their husbands help, they are not in a position to perform their duties.
9. Women are influenced in their legislative role more by their personal, socio-economic status than their level of education.
10. Women belong to the higher social status strata possess relatively more political awareness than the women of lower social status strata.
11. Most of the women seem to be happy with their being the members of local government while being unconcerned about the business being transacted in the body.
12. Majority of women present themselves in public roles as representing either their spouses or families rather than their gender (women).
13. Lack of knowledge, tradition and financial dependence are reasons for the failure of women to act independently.
14. A majority of women who seek legislative recruitment in local governments belong to either middle or lower middle classes.
15. Women are relatively strong in their social and economic roles when compared to their political roles.
16. Character assassination and criminalization did not emerge as factors inhibiting the women's participation in civic matters.

The result of a survey indicate that nearly 80 percent of men and women favour active participation of women in politics and over 75 percent of men and women favored reservations for women in legislatures. Yet women are found to be marginalized even at the level of local government. An in depth examination reveals that there is no direct correlation between literacy and their political performance. One of the many reasons the investigator identified for the failure of women do not able to perform their public role is their inability to establish a nexus with bureaucrats like men. Further it is also found that women perform such public roles which do not require their full - time.

Effective political participation of women is urgently necessary today to carry forward the struggle beyond welfare measures : it is a struggle for equality, a struggle in defence of women's human rights, a struggle for women's rightful place in all avenues of public life, a struggle for probity in the conduct of the nation's affairs, a struggle against authoritarianism and every manifestation of obscurantism. Victims of domination for hundreds of years, women in their new role are expected to do better than most of the current practitioners in the art of administration precisely because women have not inherited any experience of dominating over others.

NOTES

- [1]. Cf. WOMEN'S REALITIES, WOMEN'S CHOICES :An Introduction to Women's Studies (Hunter College Women's Studies Collective (Oxford University Press, New York, 1983), pp. 537-8.
- [2]. Vinoba, WOMEN'S POWER (Sary Sova Sangh Prakashan, Rajghat, Varanasi, 1982), p. 12. 3. TOWARDS EQUALITY : Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in INDIA (Government of India, Ministry of Education & Social Welfare, New Delhi, December 1974), p. 301.
- [3]. TOWARDS EQUALITY, p. 301.

- [4]. TOWARDS EQUALITY, pp. 302-03.
- [5]. Ibid., pp. 304-05.
- [6]. S. K. Agarwala's entry entitled 'The Federal Principle i Indian Polity', in PANCHAYATI RAJ IN INDIA, Deep & Deep Publications, New Delhi, 1984), p. 190.
- [7]. Dr. M.Jhansi and G Kusuma Kumari “Women Leadership in Panchayati Raj – Acase Study of East & West Godavari’s, Tittle: Need of Empowering Panchayati Raj Institutions & Paramount Publishing House, New Delhi)