

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF WOMEN IN POLITICAL PARTIES: A PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

The interest for women on a larger political spectrum has escalated further with the successful introduction of the 33 percent Women's Reservation Bill in Indian Parliament in 2010. And with the Maharashtra Assembly following suit by having increased its reservation quota for women in local bodies from 33 percent to per cent in the 2011 State Budget Session, the country appears well poised to launch itself as the forbearer of women's empowerment on an International scale.

Yet inspite of these initiatives, the Baseline Report of Women and Political Participation in India laid down by the National Institute of Advanced Studies- Gender Studies Unit (NIAS) and Women's Voice National Alliance of Women (NAWO) (2004) states that across political parties, the trend of treating women as mere decorative pieces contributes in the form of women's wings. Not much importance is given to women mainstream activities that include major fundraising skills, which many women excel at. The participation of women in the political processes is further impeded due to various social, economic, historical, geographical, and cultural factors , thereby resulting in their minimized contribution and many a times even being excluded.

The report further adds that illiteracy, patriarchal values, lack of access and control over income and other resources, restrictions to public spaces and insensitive legal systems continue to impair their effective political participation. This is confirmed by an almost nonexistent or insufficient availability of

infrastructural facilities and support services to assist their participation. Also there are no specific laws or policies that can strengthen the grounds for political and economic empowerment of women.

Several more reports like the above published by various academic institutions as well as independent studies have indicated that women, including women politicians find it hard to participate in politics, let alone equalise the gender gap which exists thereby signalling an urgent need for analysing the role that women play in Indian politics.

Many women politicians on the other hand have also complained and continue to do so that even within political parties, they are rarely found in leadership positions. The ever used theory of women candidates usually being fielded from 'losing' constituencies when a party does not want to waste its male candidate continues to this day.

On the other hand it has been observed that women groups influence better independently than in political parties. These groups have in fact been completely eradicated from the socio-political landscape of India especially in urban areas post the talk of women's reservations. The primary reason for this remains that these women groups have been substituted by women who are either relatives of 'powers that be' or who were earlier under pressure to implement the recommendations of these women's groups that have played a pivotal role in changing the social policies of the country whether it was price rise or portable drinking water.

MERE SILENT SPECTATORS?

Too often women gaining access to political life has often been blamed on male uniformity—that women accessing political life with due support and positive contacts of the family, particularly that of the husband, father or brother. This holds true to such an extent that women tend to being reduced to mere

'decorative pieces' and 'silent spectators'—whether is the Indian Parliament or even the Municipal Corporation.

According to the latest official records of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) (2010) (the latter is all set to get 50% reservation for women from 2012), out of the 89 women corporators elected, 53 have spoken less than 10 times in 2010. 30 have remained silent and only 23 have spoken between three and 10 times. There are only 12 women corporators who the BMC claims have had an impressive record of raising issues or giving opinions in more than 25 meetings.

Similarly in the recent Maharashtra Assembly elections, the state inspite of being progressive for women had managed to elected only 11 women elected to the 288 member House. In 1999, out of 86 women candidates, 12 had won while in 2004 out of 157 women who contested only 12 managed to gain victory. It should be observed that even voters seemed to hesitate in getting a woman candidate elected while major political parties had fielded only 11 % women candidates.

According to a report by the (Maharashtra Election Watch & Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR, 2009) there has been a growth in the number of candidates contesting the Maharashtra Assembly elections. The report adds out of 3565 candidates in 2009, men and women candidates were 3353 (94%) and 212 (6%) respectively. In 2004, out of 2678 candidates, 2521 were men (94%) and 157 (6%) women. Hence, the percentage of men and women candidates in 2004 and 2009 elections has remained the same.'

Similarly a study of Elected Women Representatives published by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2008) though confirms that women reservation did help facilitate the first entry of women into politics (83%) however it did not help much in continuing for second or third terms, as the proportion they got elected was 45% and 58% respectively. 'The role of reservation was also

evident from the fact that it emerged as an important motivator (43%) for contesting the first election as much as withdrawal was an important reason for not contesting the election among former women representatives (39%). Ex-women representatives who faced defeated in their attempts to continue their careers, accepted that there was less social interaction and/or no proper campaigning (52%) on their part.

The study also highlighted the fact that 91% of women did not contest any intermediate/Zilla Parishad election and that higher levels of political aspiration are generally not present among the Gram Panchayat-level Panchayati Raj functionaries.

THE APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

So are mere electoral reforms the only way for women empowerment?

An exercise cum study on women empowerment was conducted under the aegis of the Development of Corporate Citizenship; a department of S P Jain Institute of Management & Research, Mumbai, by the author between 2007 and 2009 on women wings of three political parties in Maharashtra brought forth startling revelations. Such as most women are interested in full-time electoral politics and a majority of them preferred to work on organizational levels of the party structure as well, provided they have the right infrastructure and resources to back them.

The objective of the workshop was not only to impart strategies to strengthen women's capacity and promote their participation in various aspects of political life leading to greater gender equality in key decision-making processes and positions but also making an attempt to understand the drawbacks they faced and analyse and come up with concrete solutions to their problems.

The empowerment workshop cum study was also aimed at providing platform and creating awareness, need and confidence through knowledge and skill

building and was designed to provide a broad outline on basic issues covering gender rights, finance, team building, social problems and solutions. One of the areas, which could make a strong social impact is building capacity among grassroots workers in the political system for effective functioning and hence out of the total five empowerment workshop conducted between 2007 and 2009, the participants of three workshops were from women wings of the Indian National Congress (INC), The Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Around 250 women participated in two workshops with the Congress and NCP conducted over the duration of two days. 25 women from the BJP participated in a day long session.

Two independent workshops of around 100 participants each were conducted for women grassroots workers who though weren't attached to any political party owed allegiance to male political leaders from their local community and were contesting the elections.

Modules like finance and gender budgeting, communications and people management skills and understanding social issues were part of the workshop cum study in order to learn the understanding and grasping skills of these participants. The language used in the workshops was Marathi and Hindi. The introduction of street theatre was used for the first time in two workshops which not only proved to be very popular but also ended up as a 'tonic' to empower the participants emotionally and spiritually towards their objective of having a clear idea of their political role in the society.

Most of the participants were aged between 20-50 years. Around 70 per cent of the participants were homemakers. The remaining participants were a mix of teachers and class IV government employees and many who mainly worked in the unorganized sector—maids, helpers etc. A large number of women, who made up the grassroots of these political wings were educated only upto the 10th grade and hailed from lower middle class backgrounds.

Communication was one of the key modules exercised in these workshops and most women disclosed that they had never attempted to speak either on a public platform or with other co-workers in any of the joint meetings conducted with their leaders. The author observed that the most women had performed the role of 'audience' diligently by attending most public rallies of their male political leaders without fail. Their roles would be generally restricted to shouting slogans for their male leaders or gathering a crowd of followers (specially women in large numbers) in order to showcase the strength of their respective leaders on a public platform.

A module on Communication and People Management conducted by Anjali Gokarn, Consultant, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (created specially for these workshops) helped make the participants more aware of themselves and many women used the opportunity through short exercises to explain how they often felt intimidated by their male counterparts in party meetings. Many disclosed that women were often kept out during key decision making meetings. Many women individually confessed that they did feel nervous while surrounded by men whenever discussing any concrete social issue and refrained from arguing back for two reasons—lack of political geographic knowledge and the inability to handle large and unruly crowds which most men are with ease at. Most women also agreed on the point that inspite of having illustrious men and women leaders in their parties they felt left out merely because of their own lack of making their higher ups understand their point of view. The vast class differences exist between a leader and his/her grassroots worker to begin with, which leaves the latter at the lowest rung of the political ladder for rest of her life.

A unique exercise through street theatre by noted street theatre group of Manjul Bharadwaj (of Experimental Theatre Foundation) was implemented wherein the participants were given 10 minutes to speak in front of an audience in the form of a skit on why they are with a political parties and what do they want for the party

in the long run. Many women it came to light were poor public speakers or had no inkling of the policies already in place for them by the earlier governments. Most women who had been attached to their political parties for as long as two decades confessed that they had never uttered a single word in front of their leaders ever. Many also confessed that even though they had campaigned for their male leaders during elections, most of them preferred to maintain a distance to the gender gap as well as for fear of character assassination. Contesting elections were a top priority for most, but not a necessity as long as their efforts were recognised by the party higher ups which wasn't in most cases.

A lecture on finance management and gender budgeting by Vibhuti Patel, (Director, Post Graduate Studies, SNDT) too proved to be an eye opener. Most women wings (except high profile independent women candidates) claimed that they functioned with almost no financial help from their parent political party leaving them at the mercy of their male candidate or family money for generation of funds to spend.

Interestingly few women though had gone ahead to independently form their own registered trusts or non-governmental organizations, or Self help Groups (SHGs) to generate funds which in turn are used by them in their capacity as political activists to get into the good books of their leaders, by either spending lavishly on banners or organising done-to-death 'safe' public events like notebook donations and blood-donation and eye-check up camps. Not any out of the box activity which could trigger off women empowerment or women participation on a large scale.

That most parties have no set structure in place to positively exploit the successful fundraising and marketing skills of these women came to light. The fact that most women do manage to create funds through transparent measures remains blatantly ignored by the party higher ups thereby creating disillusionment amongst the educated and independent women who failing to find

encouragement for their efforts forfeit their political dreams by looking out for better options in the long run, thereby creating a vacuum for good sound and honest women political leaders. The cycle continues.

POLITICAL CAREER, A MYTH FOR MANY

Most women had in fact no idea of what their role and contribution for the overall women in the society in general should be simply because none of the political parties or the male and women political leaders conduct meetings or interactions with them to generate any favourable ideas for women empowerment.

Women between the ages of 24 and 28 years who did declare interest in politics often tend to give up post marriage or just mere boredom after scrutinizing the party inside out. The prime age of an independent woman being drawn to political participation remains between the ages of 32 and 40 years, in both cases though not voluntarily but on the instance of a family or a friend and after only having given considerable time to the upbringing of their young family.

Women from upper-middle class in urban cities generally preferred to stay away from being involved in political parties because many claimed they were presented with many lucrative and fulfilling options to choose from than being merely involved in the crowded affair of political parties and endless waiting for that big break to come.

A case study - Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers (International IDEA, 1998) confirms that the constraints of family life continue to be real concerns even for privileged women interested in a political life. The lack of resources for working women coupled with their class situation and economic struggle added to that the responsibility of bringing up a young family are the core issues that no form of reservation can tackle.

That various political parties cater differently to the mindset of a woman interested in a political career came to the fore. Secular parties like the Indian National Congress continued to attract women hailing from minority backgrounds and specially Hindi-speaking (though with roots from the Hindi heartland), while the Nationalist Congress Party appeared more to focus on women belonging to Maratha dominated communities. Fiza, a Muslim woman in her late forties who resides in the slums of Malwani has been a Congress party worker for a decade. Fiza adds that the reason she joined the Congress was this was the only secular party she had known of. Though she confess that in the last many years she has not received any monetary help from any Muslim leaders attached to the party for the 'social worker' she does in the slums to help promote the party.

"I generally collect small loans from my husband who works as an autorickshaw driver or neighbours to pay for admissions of poor girls who dropout of the municipal schools in my area. The party does not help me in this regard, though I often end up campaigning for the local Congress MLAs and corporators by gathering women for their rallies. The only reimbursements we get are continuous supply of food and water on those days and during elections some money."

Educated women, devoid of any dynastic political connections were likely to continue for a mere five years only in case of the above scenario.

Dynastic dominance too remains a major factor for independent women not desiring a political career. The Congress and the BJP are controlled by strong dynastic families and breaking into their circle of confidantes, admitted many women takes years for any newcomer. The Congress is dominated by the Gandhi family and so are its set of loyal followers who are leaders in their own right and have created their own second and third generation of daughters and sons to carry on their legacy. Though the NCP created by Sharad Pawar, was the first to announce 50% reservations for women when it was first founded in 1991, ever since Pawar brought in his own daughter Supriya Sule via the Rajya

Sabha route five years ago, and then handed her his 'traditional' Baramati constituency to contest for in the Lok Sabha, the bitterness amongst the women of NCP has been on the rise.

Alpana Painter, former President of the NCP, Mumbai (Women's Wing) says how difficult it is always for women to make a mark in political parties without any support. Painter who headed the Maharashtra Social Welfare Board as its Chairperson for nearly five years says that most women who are attached to their party mainly come from lower class backgrounds and living in slums and tenements compared to the middle and upper middle class who are a bit well off. Most of them live in utter poverty or are victims of domestic violence or social abuse at the hands of slum lords. "A woman with no educational background and young children at her mercy often ends up looking for different avenues to protect herself. In slums this figure is very high. The reason most women from slums join political parties is because they seek refuge in showing off their political affiliations to escape threats from both a violent husband and a violent society that they live in."

The Bharatiya Janata Party on the other hand attracts women with sound educated and economic backgrounds. The lifespan of a woman in the BJP continued well beyond a decade merely because the BJP invested considerable time and energy in grooming their workers through social workshops and public speaking discourses on religion and public affairs. A women BJP worker hence appears more skilled and confident unlike the others.

OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

For women with almost no political connections to make a mark on her own merit within the party structure or outside it takes up considerable amount of time and energy. Many women admitted that they were forced to toe the line as independent ideas were often ditched for safer approaches. Also with no training and infrastructure to train women desirous of a political career across political

parties, most women ended up being mentally or sexually exploited by their male counterparts who promise of political empowerment. Most women admitted that their attempts at networking (read accompanying both male and female political leaders at all times as sidekicks) did little to give them a sense of where they were headed. "Women are more like reception committees. They are called to decorate stages whenever any big leader comes down from New Delhi or we are asked to wait for them at airport to show him that we are supporting him. But in all these years I must admit that I haven't actually done anything for women empowerment except attend private parties thrown by political leaders and wish them on their birthdays," admits Meenal Gaikwad, a Youth Congress Worker.

Political parties need to resort to identification and training of skills necessary for women and their contribution on the wide arena of politics than just announcing electoral reservations. Creating the much needed infrastructure for women from all walks of life should be taken into account by any political party desirous of taking a serious approach towards women's empowerment.

Attempts must be made to bridge the gap between the organised and unorganised sector in order to increase women participation in the political arena. Child-rearing too should be recognised as a nation building activity and endeavour should be made to create a sound childcare industry in order for women to favourably devote time between managing a young family and the nation. By constructing 24/7 childcare centres, educated and working mothers from both middle and upper middle classes who are major tax contributors to the national treasury can be wooed into electoral politics. Thereby creating a path for not only educated and serious women but also sincerely promoting a healthy trend of politics in the long run. On the other hand, this might also help in establishing, rearranging and creating different kinds of employment for the unorganised sector which today lies scattered in fringes and is chaotic, unsure, expanding into unknown territories and that which refuses to adhere to any social norms.

All said and done, the women's reservation bill should take social, cultural, economical and geographical factors of women into account as they have the necessary skills for nation building activity and steps should be taken in those directions.

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