

# Indian Democracy and Women Political Participation – An Overview

**\*Ambutai. Asst Professor of Political Science. Govt First Grade College. Siruguppa.**

## Abstract

True democracy is a system which in Abraham Lincoln's words, is a government of the people, by the people and for the people. While most of the democracies have given a system which has government elected by all the sections of societies, it is debatable whether the government comprises of all the diverse sections and importantly whether the government works for all the people of the democracy. In this context, the problem of low participation of women is of special concern for democracies and without changing that true democracy can never be achieved.

Women's participation in decision-making is essential for women's interests to be incorporated into governance. It has been widely experienced that governance structures which do not provide for adequate participation of women, often suffer from state interventions which are neither inclusive nor democratic. Including women, especially in local governments is an essential step towards creating gender equal opportunities and gender sensitive policies. Since women have different needs and perspectives on social and political issues, it is important to involve women in governments to incorporate all of the societal viewpoints in policy and decision-making processes. Women are actively involved in household and community work and hence well aware of real issues faced by common people. This gives them insight and perspective which can be instrumental in sustainable overall development.

The presence of women in local governments serves as an encouragement for other women to enter diverse professions and leads to breaking stereotypes of women's roles in society and public space. People had gained confidence in women as good public administrators and local government representatives after seeing women making a positive difference in other people's life. The society acknowledges the sincerity and commitment of women to their duties and their resistance to criminalization of politics. The measurement of women political participation is essential to identify the need of policy intervention to improve the same. India had understood the need to record gender statistics on political participation since its independence. The process of capturing women participation at the local level is an evolving area and efforts are being done to improve the present infrastructure. The present paper aims at studying the Indian democracy and the participation of womenfolk in the decision making process of the Indian Republic

*Keywords— democracy, India, women political participation, adult franchise, Universal franchise*

## Introduction

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 house- hold 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 Patil. In the present central government, women comprise roughly quarter of the Indian cabinet with portfolios like external affairs, commerce and human resource development. At the ground level, India has a significant proportion of women in local level politics which has been achieved by reserving seat for women. 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, Annie Besant need no introduce- tion 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.

He understood that true freedom cannot be achieved if all the sections of the society are not truly rep- resented. 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.2.2 Women Reservation BillPost Gandhi, India experienced centralization of planning which resulted in higher inequality in polit- ical decision making at the various levels. While Government was deeply concerned of issues of gender equality, women were not always a part of such decision making. Although, India has seen women participating in politics as the longest serving Prime minister, as chief ministers of various states, members in national parliament and state legislative assemblies in large numbers, yet the occurrence of such events has not been commensurate to their population. In order to enable better women participation in active politics, authorities had been trying to put in reservation for women but have not been successful in true terms due to non-support from some of the regional parties. Back in history, one of the prominent member of freedom struggle, Sarojini Naidu rejected reser- vation for women, citing that women are not weak, timid, meek. She claimed that the demand for granting preferential treatment to women is an admission on her part of her inferiority and there has been no need for such a thing in India as the women have always been by the side of men. The issue of women's reservation again came to limelight in 1973 with voices recommending reser- vation for women in at least one third of the seats and eventually statutory women's panchayats at the village level were recommended to take care of the neglect of women in rural development programs through 73rd & 74th constitutional amendments in 1993. Women's Reservation Bill or the Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, is a pending bill in India which proposes to reserve 33 per cent of all seats in the Lower house of Parliament of India.

## Objective:

This paper intends to study the participation of women in Indian political ecosphere and the overall impact of their contribution to the upliftment of the Republic

## WOMEN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIAN POLITICS: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Representative organizations from the top level to the lowest level in three dimensions of political decision making, financial control and administrative management. It stands for people's right to initiate their own projects for local well-being and the power to execute and operate them in an autonomous manner. So decentralization is prime mechanism through which democracy becomes truly representative and responsive. The approach paper to ninth five year plan has given due consideration for decentralized planning. The approach paper states that the states are required to endow the panchayats with such powers and authority which enables them to function as institutions of say government as envisaged in the constitution. To enable the panchayats to prepare the plan for economic development and social justice, they should be backed with adequate finance, personnel and administrative supports. Mobilization of own resources by the panchayat will be one of the important priorities in the Ninth plan. In the ninth plan, it is expected that the 29 subjects Identified in the Eleventh schedule would be transferred to PRI s.

Some of the states did prepare district plans, but these plans did not mark any effective step towards decentralized planning. The period of further plan was a landmark so far as the decentralized planning is concerned. During this period, the call for decentralized planning came into prominence and a central scheme was initiated to assist the states for strengthening their planning setup and extending it up to the district level. One of the important attempts in this direction is the report of the working group on block level planning (1978). This report known as the report of the Dantwala committee, grew out of the concern for (a) generating employment (b) assuring basic minimum infrastructure, and (d) promoting equity. all state legislative assemblies for women. The seats to be reserved in rotation will be determined by draw of lots in such a way that a seat shall be reserved only once in three consecutive general elections. Women's Reservation Bill, was passed in Rajya Sabha on March 9, 2010 But Lok Sabha could not clear the bill due to resistance of some regional parties on certain provisions of the bill.

### 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 system, viz, panchayats (village governance bodies) at the village, intermediate and district levels in every state, except provision of skipping intermediate level in states with less than twenty lakh population. The states have been em- powered 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 con- ducting elections in the state Election Commission. The state government is also empowered to make laws providing criteria for disqualification of candidature from panchayat elections and also to legis- late 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 pow- ers 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. When you talk about countries with highest number of female representation in the parliament, the quota system or 'reservation' seems to be a common factor behind more women in politics as legislators. For instance, while women dominate Rwanda's national legislature (thanks to the thirty percent quota for women in parliament and government), a 2014 electoral law in Bolivia required 50 percent of each political party's list be women. Similarly countries like Mexico, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, South Africa etc., too have legislated quotas that women are elected in their respective parliaments. 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.

## CURRENT MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK

India is the largest democracy in the world with a three layer governance structure: central government, state government and city/village government. The election to all these three is done by an independent body of Election Commission which is constituted separately at state and central level. At the national level, the head of government, prime minister, is elected by the members of Lok Sabha, lower house of the parliament of India. All members of Lok Sabha except two, who can be nominated by president of India, are directly elected through general elections which take place every five years, by universal adult suffrage. Unlike most of the other democracies of the world, India gave women voting right since the first election. Members of Rajya Sabha, upper house of Indian parliament, are elected by an Electoral college comprising of Members of Lok Sabha, elected members of the legislative assemblies of states and Union Territories of India. Similar structure is in place in various states of India with two bodies called Vidhan Sabha and Vidhan Parishad. Data of successive central and state elections show that Indian democracy is truly representative of women when it comes to their participation in elections but it significantly lacks women participation as legislature and executive.

***Measurement of Women's Political Participation at the Local Level:*** 73rd and 74th amendments of the Indian Constitution, a third tier of governance was created. It has helped in providing new opportunities for local level planning, effective implementation and monitoring of various social and economic development programs in the country. 3.2 Electoral Statistics in India An independent Election Commission has been established under the Constitution in order to carry out and regulate the holding of elections in India. The Election Commission is responsible for the conduct of elections to parliament and state legislatures and to the offices of the President and Vice-President. The Election Commission prepares, maintains and periodically updates the Electoral Roll, which shows who is entitled to vote, supervises the nomination of candidates, registers political parties, monitors the election campaign, including candidates funding. It also facilitates the coverage of the election process by the media, organizes the polling booths where voting takes place, and looks after the counting of votes and the declaration of results. All this is done to ensure that elections can take place in an orderly and fair manner. \

Women Voter Turnout percentage in 2014 election across different states. It was 65.53% across India. States All the statistics for the elections is primarily maintained by the Election Commission with information on both the voter participation as well as the information on elected representatives. The electoral rolls in India are compiled based on a four stage classification. The entire country has been divided into 543 parliamentary constituencies. Each parliamentary constituency has several assembly constituencies in it. An assembly constituency is further divided into Wards. Each Ward has multiple Poll stations (PS) which are practically smallest manageable unit for conducting voting in that area. The information on voting pattern is accumulated at the polling station level with a field that includes gender information. Extensive data has been captured since the first election which has been made public through digitalization. This allows the government to identify political participation of women in elections at the level of polling station which typically is of the order of 1000 voters. Fig 1 shows the statistics of the voting percentage of women across different states in the recently held Lok Sabha elections. 3.3 Political Participation of Women Political participation of women can be measured in three different dimensions: their participation as a voter, their participation as an elected representative and their participation in the actual decision Andaman & Nicobar Islands Andhra Pradesh Arunachal Pradesh Assam

Bihar Chandigarh Chattisgarh Dadra & Nagar Haveli Daman & Diu Delhi Goa Gujarat Haryana Himachal Pradesh Jammu & Kashmir Jharkhand Karnataka Kerala Lakshadweep Madhya Pradesh Maharashtra Manipur Meghalaya Mizoram Nagaland Odisha Puducherry Punjab Rajasthan Sikkim Tamil Nadu Tripura Uttar Pradesh Uttarakhand West Bengal Women Turnout Percentage

The first of these two dimensions have been measured and reported by the Election Commission from the first election which was held in 1952 with few exceptions.

While India has a good record of women holding all the important posts in the country, the overall participation of women in politics is not very satisfactory. At the local level, women participation as an elected representative is high primarily because of the reservation introduced for women as per the 73rd amendment in the Indian constitution. Concerns have been raised over the genuine participation of women as an elected representative. It has been reported that the men have been ruling with their women as a proxy and presently there are not many robust techniques to identify genuine women participation. Voting percentage of women in the most recent Lok Sabha, Vidhan Sabha and Panchayat elections. It stressed on need to develop a system of regular collection of data on a set of core variables. With a view to conceptualize the system, the Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation (MoSPI) constituted a high level expert committee headed by a Member, Planning Commission in 2004. The report of the expert committee submitted to the Government of India in 2006 provided a broad framework for undertaking a schematic approach to get the data collected and compiled through the PRI mechanism for the rural areas. The Ministry on the advice of the Planning Voting Percentage Voting Percentage

Women participating in politics have a better understanding of women based issues and their awareness about the know-hows of government functioning render better solutions to the society in terms of bring about gender equity in the country. Once the qualitative data on women participation in politics is captured and analysed properly, the planners may give shape to more programmes on women empowerment to enhance the radiating effects of women empowerment.

### **CHALLENGES IN MEASURING WOMEN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

The measurement of women participation in politics based on voting percentage and election to legislature is relatively easy. The challenge is to estimate the actual participation of women in the decision making process.

**4.1 Participation as a Proxy Candidate** There have been evidences that due to reservation policy, certain women got elected into the setup, but they acted merely as the mouth-piece of the their male family members. This indicates that there is a possibility of on-roll women participation to be higher than what it actually exists on ground. Awareness programs and increase in female education is now taking care of such happenings and women active participation is on an increase. Still there is a need to record data at a more micro level so that women who only act as a proxy can be identified.

**4.2 Measurement of Decision Making Initiatives** The quantitative data of political participation of women at local level is available but the qualitative data on the aspects of their active participation including the utilization of the decision-making functionality provided to them is not being quantified properly. Although, the legislature has enabled their huge presence into the state of affairs, but their valuable essence into the system is yet to be established at most of the places. The data on their sensitization about their rights and its usage is still missing. Efforts can be made to capture the performance of women in debates, initiative in bringing legislation and participation in other aspects of the democratic process.

## POSSIBLE APPROACHES FOR A ROBUST MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK

**Application of Technology**The new government in India has a penchant for using technology for taking government schemes to the remote areas. The mobile penetration in India is even more than the penetration of electricity connections. The digital communication advancements may be introduced to capture the actual participation of women in Panchayat activities by counting their attendance and their vote share in passing a decision in the Panchayat. Portals and mobile applications may be developed to voice the women issues by calling response from general women.

**5.2 Application of Analytics**Advanced analytics can be used to validate, cluster and segment data regarding women participation in local level politics. Big Data techniques have allowed policy planners to work with huge chunk of data which can be both quantitative as well as qualitative. Techniques like text mining and video mining can be utilized to extract meaningful information out of the huge data which can be in the form of recordings, documents and other information. Work has been started by the new government to use social media analytics for grass root development and gender issues can be incorporated into this framework.

**5.3 Development of Women Political Participation Score**The collection of data on women participation in politics is essential for policymakers. With lot of related and unrelated data, it becomes imperative to convert that information into an indicator which can be utilized for policy intervention. Data required for this task may include all the three aspects of political participation which are: women as electorate, women as elected representatives and women as policy makers. Other aspects of gender statistics can also be included as an input to give a holistic measure of women participation in that area. A single score which can be weighted average of normalized version of different dimensions can be used for both budgeting and policy intervention purposes.

(1) All the States / UT Governments may impress upon Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to ensure the safety of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) / Female Sarpanches (elected village head), particularly those belonging to the weaker sections. They should not be physically harmed, assaulted or humiliated in any manner on any count. Discrimination of any kind against them should not be allowed to remain unheeded and resolved expeditiously.

(2) To put a curb on the cases of proxy attendance by relatives of women EWRs, States have been advised to initiate departmental proceedings against the officers in whose presence such meetings are held.

(3) To advise the concerned authorities of PRIs that meeting of Mahila Sabha / Palli Sabha (ladies congregation) be held prior to Gram Sabha Meeting (village meeting) and recommendations/ decisions of Mahila Sabhas mandatorily transmitted to Gram Sabhas who should consider the proposals imperatively.

(4) In the quorum of Gram Sabha, inclusion of at least half of the number of women voters should be mandated. States which have not mandated such a provision should do so.

(5) PRIs should be involved in any Integrated Plan of action to prevent and combat women trafficking, problems in disturbed areas, displacement due to land acquisition etc. Related matters may be taken up in Mahila Sabha in case of issues of children and women. The data on political participation of women is of immense use of planners and policy makers to evolve better schemes and programmes, which can be better implemented by women at local level.

### Key Issues and Analysis

- There are divergent views on the reservation policy. Proponents stress the necessity of affirmative action to improve the condition of women. Some recent studies on panchayats have shown the positive effect of reservation on empowerment of women and on allocation of resources.

- Opponents argue that it would perpetuate the unequal status of women since they would not be perceived to be competing on merit. They also contend that this policy diverts attention from the larger issues of electoral reform such as criminalisation of politics and inner party democracy.
- Reservation of seats in Parliament restricts choice of voters to women candidates. Therefore, some experts have suggested alternate methods such as reservation in political parties and dual member constituencies.
- Rotation of reserved constituencies in every election may reduce the incentive for an MP to work for his constituency as he may be ineligible to seek re-election from that constituency.
- The report examining the 1996 women's reservation Bill recommended that reservation be provided for women of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) once the Constitution was amended to allow for reservation for OBCs. It also recommended that reservation be extended to the Rajya Sabha and the Legislative Councils. Neither of these recommendations has been incorporated in the Bill.

## Conclusion

India has a rich history of measuring political participation of women since its independence. The decentralization of governance which is taking place for last two decades has increased the importance of measuring participation of women in decision making. Proper gender budgeting has already been worked out for inclusive growth of women & girls by ear-marking one third budget for the women in all the schemes. The Indian Government has a lot of emphasis on utilizing real time data for measuring different social indicators and using them for policy intervention. With more responsive data on women participation, better gender budget initiatives aim to move the country towards a gender equal society.

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