

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IN INDIA: ACHIEVING GENUINE DEMOCRACY

RANJANA KUMARI || This paper will discuss the challenges and opportunities for Indian women in their quest for political space and an active role in shaping their destiny. It will outline the current status of women's representation in decision-making and will reinforce their fundamental right to participate in the political process. Furthermore, it will emphasise why the realisation of this right is central to achieving genuine democratic governance and gender equality throughout India.

INTRODUCTION

The women's movement in India is striving to address and resolve two major contradictions in the country's democratic framework. These challenges are preventing Indian women from engaging on an equal basis with men. The first problem is the tension between growing democratic aspirations among women and the restricted opportunities available for them in the country's democratic structure, functions and processes of political decision-making. The second problem is associated with the existing gender deficit amid this new consciousness. The demand for a 33 % reservation of seats for women in state and national governance and zero tolerance of violence against women are interrelated constructive solutions to deepen democratic roots. The removal of institutional barriers will ensure unrestricted opportunities for women in the political space as well as the elimination of the gender deficit in the public sphere.

GENUINE DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Democratic governance has long been promoted as crucial for facilitating social and economic development, and for overcoming poverty. Derived from the Greek words "demos" which means people, and "kratos" which means to have strength or to rule, democratic governance inherently stands for people's participation. Democ-

racy is, therefore, set apart from other systems of governance for two key reasons. Firstly, the participation of citizens in the governance structure ensures that the needs and values of the community are reflected in the government's approach and policies. Secondly, giving citizens the right and responsibility to elect their representatives enables communities to hold governments accountable for their actions.¹

Democracies can have different structures and can function differently depending on social and cultural contexts. However, there are several key elements that are vital to functioning democratic societies. These include the facilitation of regular, free and fair elections and the existence of active opposition parties, access to independent information, freedom of speech and movement, and freedom to engage with governing bodies by voting, campaigning, contesting elections, political advocacy, the rule of law, and the functioning of independent judiciaries.² As such, democratic governance can only be genuine when the human rights of citizens are recognised and independent structures are available to uphold these rights. Further, for democracy to be truly representative and inclusive, all citizens must have equal opportunities to participate within democratic processes. If these conditions do not exist, the benefits of democracy for social and economic development will be severely limited.

CHALLENGES TO INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY

More than half of the countries around the world are electoral democracies yet true democratic governance remains elusive in most of these countries. The creation of an inclusive political system has been restricted by three major factors. Firstly, as already mentioned and as global statistics indicate, most electoral democracies provide very limited political space and roles for women. This is demonstrated by the high rates of gender inequality in legislative bodies, trade unions, interest groups, associations, and the media.³ The women's movement has taken steps to address this issue. But there is a need for a paradigm shift in which complete and equal participation of citizens of both sexes is ensured.

Secondly, human development gaps between men and women persist in most post-colonial societies in Latin America, Africa and Asia.⁴ These gaps restrict women's decision-making capacity. It is a well-recognised principle within the discourse of democracy that participation in decision-making is the best guarantee of justice and dignity to all constituents of any polity. This obvious principle has still not been implemented in most post-colonial democracies.⁵ India is aware of this remedy and is introducing gender-based reservations in governance at grassroots level. There is, however, a need to move from the micro to the macro level in India's decision-making system. Until these measures are incorporated at all levels of governance, no one can predict how long it will take to develop consistency in the decision-making system and achieve development through participatory democracy.

Finally, the very nature of democracy has led to detrimental outcomes. The process of democratisation has reached stagnation levels globally. Many democratic societies present a mismatch between democratic theory and reality in democratic governance. The political elite in such societies enjoy a certain kind of legitimacy due to the institutionalisation of multi-party legislative systems and proper electoral machinery. Yet this remains inadequate in terms of their capacity to be organically connected with the deprived classes, particularly the landless labourers, workers in the unorganised sector, home-based producers, and self-employed women and men.

ADDRESSING THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

India is emerging as the largest state which is struggling for the realisation of democracy for the deprived. The government and civil society are working on many fronts to ensure all women and men are engaged with decision-making and feel connected to governance structures. There is already great constitutional support since the Constitution of India has clear concepts with reference to the direction of nation-building and social reconstruction to achieve equality in economic, political and social practice.⁶ The difficulty in strengthening democracy in India originates from the conflict between democratic foundations and the hierarchical and discriminatory nature of India's social and cultural traditions that exclude women, Dalits, and other underprivileged groups.⁷

WOMEN'S STATUS IN INDIA

India's social and cultural structures are so hierarchical and discriminatory that minority groups continue to be excluded from decision-making forums and experience widespread discrimination and disadvantage. In this context, the marginalisation of women from India's political sphere represents a major challenge. This challenge is, however, not limited to India but is a common concern in democracies around the world. Women throughout the developing world are not only under-represented in decision-making bodies but there is widespread marginalisation of women voters and political activists. Moreover, women who are politically active, either as engaged citizens or elected representatives, often face discrimination, harassment and violence at the hands of disgruntled community members and political rivals or even their own families and political parties.⁸ This democratic deficit has strong implications for women, whose rights to political participation are violated by their marginalisation from democratic governance. It has also led to policies that do not adequately reflect the values, needs and priorities of women, thereby reducing their effectiveness in addressing inequalities and promoting development.

In India, which is the world's largest democracy, equal rights and status for women are enshrined in the Constitution. Adopted in 1950 after freedom was won from the British colonial powers, the Constitution reflects the spirit of the

freedom movement, which is focused on individual rights and non-discrimination on the basis of caste, class, and gender. It also incorporates affirmative action practices to overcome discrimination against women in social, cultural and political spaces. Women's equality is guaranteed under Articles 14, 15, 15 (3), 16, 39 (a), 39 (b), 39 (c) and 42 of the Constitution.⁹ Nevertheless, even after 66 years of freedom and democracy, Indian women do not enjoy full and equal rights of citizenship. This remains a major challenge to the realisation of true democratic governance. In addition, patriarchal values are deeply embedded in many of India's social, political and cultural structures, which lead women to face discrimination and apathy in their public and private lives.

Moreover, women have less access to education and the female literacy rate of 65 % remains 16 % lower than the male literacy rate.¹⁰ Women also experience higher morbidity than men but have less access to health care. Approximately 55 % of women suffer from anaemia¹¹ and India's maternal mortality rate is 212 per every 100,000 live births. In 2010 there were 57,000 maternal deaths across India. This amounts to one death every 10 minutes.¹²

Violence or the risk of violence against women is widespread in India. It permeates every aspect of women's lives from birth to death. 34% of women in India experience violence at least once in their lives. This violence is institutionalised through family structures, wider social and economic frameworks, and cultural and religious traditions.¹³

Gender-based violence starts before women are even born and nearly 600,000 girls are missing in India each year as a result of sex-selective abortions.¹⁴ The practice of dowry, which involves the family of the bride giving gifts and money to the family of the groom, reinforces women's subordination and their economic dependence on their husbands. Dowry disputes also often lead to violence against women and in 2012 there were 8,233 cases of dowry-related deaths in India.¹⁵

The 16 December 2012 gang rape case in Delhi brought the issue of violence against women into the limelight and has highlighted the need to ensure women's safety and security. In 2012 there were 24,923 cases of rape, 45,351 cases of molestation and 9,173 cases of sexual harassment

reported throughout the country. Rape is the fastest growing crime in India.¹⁶

However, domestic violence remains the most common form of gender-based violence in India. Official statistics indicate that 36 % of married women between the ages of 15-49 have experienced violence at some point since they turned 15.¹⁷ Under-reporting of cases of violence against women, particularly domestic violence, is also widespread. The actual number of women who experience violence at home is believed to be significantly higher.

Gender inequality has a devastating impact on women's health, well-being, and dignity. It is also detrimental to social, economic and political progress. If India is to achieve legitimate participatory democracy, it must break down the patriarchal structures that underpin this inequality. One of the most effective ways of addressing gender inequality and discrimination is to ensure women's active and direct participation in governance.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN GOVERNANCE BODIES

Despite making up 48 % of India's population and 47.5 % of the registered voting population, women currently hold only 11 % of lower house seats and 10.6 % of upper house seats in national parliaments.¹⁸ Further, in 2012 only four women held ministerial positions. This amounts to a disappointing 9.8 % of all ministerial roles.¹⁹

The women's movement in India has been vocal in highlighting the marginalisation and discrimination that women face across the country and has demanded space within the political arena. In response to pressure from women constituents, as articulated by the women's movement, the Government of India passed the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution in 1992.²⁰ This mandated that 33 % of seats be reserved for women at the local level of politics. The reservation of seats for women in local politics means that in contrast to state and national parliaments, women's participation in local governing bodies is much higher. Since the implementation of the reservation system, women's political participation in local self-governance has skyrocketed. Currently, over 1.5 million women hold positions in Panchayati Raj institutions, 36.8 %

of all those elected.²¹ The emergence of effective women leaders has led many states to voluntarily increase the reservation of seats for women to 50 %. In states such as Bihar, which has 50 % reservation, women made up 54 % of all elected representatives at the Panchayat level.²²

Women's leadership in Panchayati Raj institutions has led to active and vocal participation of women in local governance and has proven to be beneficial for women and for wider communities. Elected women representatives experience higher self-esteem and confidence. They feel more respected by their families and communities and have stronger decision-making skills.²³ The incorporation of women's perspectives in decision-making processes has also meant that governance at the Panchayati Raj level is more reflective of the needs, values and views of the whole community rather than just of male constituents.²⁴

Unfortunately, the process of deepening democracy by increasing the participation of women has not been replicated at the state and national levels of governance and the struggle, therefore, continues. Moreover, it is evident that the reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions has not removed all the barriers to women's engagement with the political sphere. Nevertheless, the process of democracy for over six decades has led to large-scale mobilisation of marginalised groups who are demanding their share. Furthermore, the reservation of seats for women has been successful in increasing the number of women holding seats in local bodies of governance as well as giving voice to women's issues and concerns. They have challenged gender discrimination in political, social and economic structures. They have also transformed social perceptions of women by re-defining them as political actors, leaders and decision-makers.

POLITICAL RESERVATIONS: ADDRESSING GENDER IMBALANCE IN GOVERNANCE

The system of reservation is a key tool in women's struggle for gender equality and is also vital for the realisation of participatory democracy on a broader scale. Special measures such as quotas can facilitate huge increases in women's political representation and can go a long way to correct the gender imbalance in politics. India is only one example of the benefits of quotas for

addressing inequalities in political participation. Currently, more than 90 countries around the world have instituted constitutional, electoral or political party quotas and other positive measures for the inclusion of women in politics.²⁵ Of the 30 countries that have 30 % or more women in national assemblies, 21 have implemented some form of mandated quotas.²⁶

Apart from this, a number of political parties have introduced voluntary quotas for women in their lists. In countries such as Germany, Norway and Sweden which are among the top 25 countries favouring women's participation in politics, these voluntary commitments are more common and play a key role in facilitating women's active participation in politics.²⁷

In India, further steps must be taken to ensure women's right to full citizenship. There is a strong need to expand the current reservation system to include state and national legislatures. The Women's Reservation Bill, which was developed to address this need, facilitates women's political participation by reserving 33 % of seats for women in state and national level governing bodies.²⁸ This bill expands the current political reservation for women and has the ability to significantly alter India's political landscape by ensuring women's active participation in all levels of governance. After being tabled several times in the late 1990s, the reformed bill was finally re-introduced into Parliament in March 2008. There was significant opposition to the bill within the Parliament, but it was finally passed by the upper house in 2010. However, it is still awaiting approval in the lower house and has now been pending for 17 long years.

The Women's Reservation Bill will support women to overcome patriarchal structures that exclude them from the political arena. Experience also demonstrates that once women have the opportunity to take on leadership positions within state and national parliaments, they prove themselves to be strong and successful leaders. This is in the face of ongoing discrimination and marginalisation within the Parliament. Women's participation in governance leads to higher standards of living and improved health, education and infrastructure indicators.²⁹

However, pending the passage of the bill, India needs to take cognisance of global efforts to

enhance women's political role. Voluntary quotas at the party level have been effective in many countries and can be used in India to increase women's space in political parties and political discourse.³⁰ Exact figures on Indian women's participation in political parties are not available, but it is evident that women are extremely under-represented within all major political parties. Women are less likely to be nominated as candidates and are often marginalised from powerful positions within party structures. Only 556 women contested the 2009 general election in India and only 59 were successful in winning their seats.³¹

EMPOWERING WOMEN LEADERS

Reservations and quotas at the constitutional or political party level are a key step in addressing the gender imbalance in India's governance system. The reservation of seats for women at the Panchayati Raj level demonstrates the capacity of political reservations to successfully elevate their role in governance. However, additional efforts are required to empower women to take on leadership roles, to overcome the many challenges they face when they choose to be active in politics, and to facilitate their full participation in the political process. The passage of the Women's Reservation Bill is an essential first step in spurring women's participation in state and national level governance. The Bill must be prioritised in the upcoming session of parliament, to be held in late November 2013.

Another step towards empowering women would be to train them in carrying out their responsibilities effectively and successfully. Leadership training programmes must target and mobilise women from all levels of society who hold or have a strong desire to take on leadership roles. These training programmes should build their capacity to participate in governance structures and teach them how to be effective leaders and agents of change within their communities. Furthermore, training modules must include the process of filing for candidature and campaigning as well as providing information on electioneering machinery.

In addition to this, initiatives must be developed either at the government or political party level to ensure that all political parties provide 33 % of winnable tickets to women candidates.

Central and state level institutional support must also be provided to women's organisations that work for the political empowerment of women. Finally, efforts should be made to develop an enabling environment that promotes and facilitates the full and active participation of women in politics.

CONCLUSION

After 66 years of democracy, India continues to face many challenges in the realisation of inclusive and genuine democratic governance. The primary democratic deficit throughout the country is the under-representation of women in decision-making bodies, particularly in the state and national legislatures where there are no reservations available for women. Women's marginalisation from political life is preventing them from participating in society as complete and equal citizens. This also reduces the capacity of decision-making bodies to effectively govern or address the needs and priorities of all members of the community.

Nevertheless, it is possible to overcome these challenges so that everyone, regardless of their gender, can participate in the governance process. The initiative for achieving this must come from the government. India must look beyond the traditional, patriarchal approach to governance. If women are kept excluded from democratic processes, legitimate democracy might never be achieved. Women's participation in politics is their human right as much as it is the cornerstone of their right to equal citizenship. Across the country, and throughout the world, men's dominance in politics must be made a thing of the past. It is women leaders who hold the keys to our future.

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