

Chapter-17

Women Political Leadership and Contemporary Challenges

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Introduction

The status of women in Indian society is linked invariably to her position in different spheres of life. Though the women are to a larger extent under represented in majority of spheres of life, her representation in political field is negligible. The lower representation in political field is hampering initiatives towards bringing total empowerment of women in India. The present research paper focuses on the participation of women in political process after independence and their overall representation in Parliament and State Legislatures. The paper points to various reasons that are responsible for low level of participation of women in formal politics. The nature of Indian social system and existing culture to a large extent prevent women from entering into active politics. The norms and values manifested through social institutions like caste, family, marriage are responsible for low participation of women in Indian political system. The systemic prejudices and discrimination prevents entry of women in politics thereby denying half of the country's women population of their true representatives. To conclude, the paper also highlights the need for Women's Reservation Bill to be implemented in proper letter and spirit. For, establishment of gender equality, encouraging women's political participation and their political empowerment, there is urgent need to address the social, financial and political impediments barring women's entry and denying them an opportunity to contribute in nation's progress and development.

Women Leadership Vacuum

There has been a long debate in society about the different initiatives necessary for empowering the women. Political thinkers, scholars and researchers have proposed different views and models for women's empowerment. However, a majority of them agree about the role of political initiatives in overall empowerment of women across different parameters. Phillips (1998) mentions that since women have different experiences than men they also have different interests. By having more women in politics the political decisions may become more gender equal and the democratic participation will increase. However, there are several reasons that prove to be detrimental to the cause of women's entry in politics viz. domestic responsibilities, lack of financial clout, rising criminalization of politics and the threat of character assassination are making it increasingly difficult for women to be part of the political framework. Moreover, women politicians point out that even within the political parties, women are rarely found in leadership positions (Rai, 2002). The Indian social scenario is lined with major impediments such as patriarchal system, caste identity, religious bias and general attitude and perception towards women restrict their entry and wider participation in politics.

The Grassroots Foundation

Indian parliament since its inception had several women members across the political parties. Though their number is small, but an opportunity was provided by the political system to take up issues concerning the Indian women and suggest measures for their empowerment. Though a majority of them were elite and belonging to the upper castes; serious doubts were raised about the true representation of women belonging to socially backward, economically weaker and under-privileged sections of society in Indian political system both at the centre and state level. Lack of space for participation in political bodies has not only resulted in presence of women in meagre numbers in decision making bodies but also has resulted in the neglect of their issues and experience in policy making. The demand for reservation for women in political representation from top to bottom of political hierarchy was raised every now and then by parties across the political fulcrum. Though the demand was raised, but undercurrents in male dominated political arena were against bringing any sort of reservation for women that might impact the political ambition and careers of male politicians. Agnihotri (2023) stressed that a political system cannot be based on ideology alone but must keep in touch with the actualities of the social situation and so adjust its operation as to achieve the desired goals of the society. However, the demand started gaining traction in 80's when the congress party started to face decline in political fortune and there was growth of regional parties and influential regional leaders. A historic milestone in the form of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, 1992 mandated a minimum of 33 % of seats in rural and urban local bodies to be reserved for women. As a result, India today has 14.5 lakh elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) making up about 46 % of all elected local leaders. Moreover, more than 20 Indian states have enacted independent laws providing 50% reservation for women in their local bodies. Research has pointed to an important fact that there is measurable increase in public spending on critical community needs like primary education, clean drinking water and sanitation when women members lead the councils and take active part in decision making.

Women leadership at higher political echelon

The provision of reservation in 3 PRIs has brought about drastic shift in local governance both at urban and rural levels with women leadership and presence contributing to good governance and well being of the marginalised sections of society. Though, women leadership thrives at local level, but their representation in the highest law making bodies has historically lagged. Women's representation in the parliament and state assemblies has either remained stagnant or has continually declined in correspondence to their total population due to emergent political culture and criminalisation of politics. However, one thing has to be kept in mind that though the number of women in parliament and state assemblies appears to be increasing in number, but it far below the actual population of women in the country. Women representation in Lok Sabha has increased from 5% in the first Lok Sabha (1951) to 15% in 17th Lok Sabha (2019). In the 18th Lok Sabha (2024), women hold 74 seats (roughly 14%) out of 543 members, while the Rajya Sabha representation is 17%. The state assemblies present even dismal picture with the national average of women MLAs at meagre 9-10%. It is interesting to note that, out of 4123 total seats in all state assemblies there are only 390 women MLAs. There is no state in India having more than 20% women legislators. According to Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) & National Election Watch (NEW) (2026), out of total 51,708 candidates analysed who contested in the current Lok Sabha and Assembly elections across the country, only

5095, (10%) are women. Similarly, among 4,666 MPs/MLAs across the country, only 464 or 10% are women. Women ministers, MPs, MLAs representation at the highest political bodies is abysmally low undermining the women's interest, experience and expertise in decision making and governance.

Reasons and challenges for the underrepresentation of women in politics

The prevalent societal norms, cultural barriers and gender stereotyping have limited women's participation in politics. The existence of prejudices and general attitude towards women and lack of family support has impeded their entry in politics in large numbers. Women are generally seen as carrier of culture and are associated with traditional gender roles and care giving duties. The stereotypes and biases based on physical characteristics, cultural biases and the long prevalent notion that women are not as electable as men further restricts their entry in political arena. The wide spread education and economic disparities and general stereotyping of society dissuades political parties from seeing women as probable winnable contestant. Verma (2022) is of the view that deep-rooted patriarchal norms and traditional views about women's roles in public life continue to act as major obstacles to effective participation. These biases can lead to resistance within political parties and among constituents, undermining the authority and acceptance of female legislators.

The political parties in India lack inner party democracy and have generally male dominated party structure which carries societal prejudices and stereotypes thereby denying women chance of political participation. Similarly, the non-transparent ticket distribution and highly centralized command structure of political parties tend to disproportionately allot ticket to male political aspirants as against women. It has been observed that the women candidates belonging to established political families, dominant castes, and financially affluent groups are allotted tickets in comparison to women belonging to socio-economic backward groups, marginalized classes and minorities. Political parties generally hesitate to field women candidates and relegate them to safe or unwinnable seats. Just to prove their faith in political empowerment of women to general public and score political brownie points over opponent political parties, they put the façade of giving more tickets to women candidates. The prevalence of criminalization, money power and high election costs put women at further disadvantage as compared to their male political counterpart.

The technical blitzkering campaigns, organizational backup, numerical support and presence on ground and overall high cost of elections further deprives women candidates opportunity for contesting elections. Other key challenges include resource scarcity, financial constraints, proxy representation, lack of opportunities for women belonging to SC/ST and OBC, cyber bully and harassment, gender-based violence, political violence and intimidation especially during elections. Kumar et.al. (2023) are of the view that Criminalization is a further barrier that keeps women away from participating in politics in modern India. Similarly, insufficient prioritisation of women's political empowerment by major parties and lack of sustained pressure from women's movements and civil society perpetuate the status quo.

Measures for political empowerment of women

The 'Women's Reservation Bill' tabled in 2008 that reserves 33% of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies marked a historic moment in India's legislative history. Over three decades later and six attempts to pass the measure, finally in September 2023 the 128th Constitution Amendment Bill, referred to as the 'Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam' was passed. Implementation is expected after the next

census and delimitation exercise. Decadal census which was to be implemented in 2021 has been delayed indefinitely. The question, therefore, remains as to whether there is enough political will to make this commitment a law. This delay also reflects male-dominated legislators' reluctance to address gender disparities in politics. The timely conduct of the census planned in 2026-27 is crucial to implement this bill by 2029. It is essential to understand the importance of women in law making as can be seen from average representation of women across the parliaments around the world. A more equitable representation of women in Indian parliament would help to promote gender equity and inclusive governance. Unshackling patriarchal norms and providing reservations for women would lead to more gender sensitive policies and better addressing of unique set of challenges faced by Indian women. The bill promotes women's political empowerment by giving them a voice in decision making and address issues that affect women directly, such as health, education and safety. The reservation will bring active participation in politics thereby strengthening both inclusive democracy and inner party democracy providing an opportunity to women across different sections of the Indian society. Nanda & Ray (2023) believes that the Act represents people's mandate for gender equality in politics. They hope that this historic moment is seized and women are trained to join politics by encouraging them to pursue higher education in subjects such as public policy, political science and law.

Conclusion

The patriarchal norms and nature of society has always accorded secondary status to women in India. Be it social, educational, economic and political spheres, the representation of women across the different levels is worrisome and a matter of concern. The most striking aspect is less than 15 per cent of women representatives in lower house (Lok Sabha) of Indian parliament. According to the Global Gender Gap Index 2023, India ranks 127 out of 146 countries, indicating a significant gap in political empowerment. Women leadership at local self government levels has been able to bring significant changes in governance and tackling local issues effectively. A voice for women at the highest level of decision making will help to address women's issues such as violence against women, low workforce participation, poor nutrition levels, skewed sex ratio etc. The women reservation bill is a significant step towards achieving gender equality in Indian politics. Though critics have questioned about diversity of women's representation, electoral fairness and implementation issues, but without bill's implementation the various anomalies cannot be rectified. The Women's Reservation Bill is not just about numbers; its about providing a voice for women at the highest decision making processes, achieving gender parity in political arena and addressing issues concerning women and brining women and children centric policies.

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