



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
Volume-I, Issue-III, November 2014, Page No. 118-122
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

Politics of Women's Reservation in India

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Abstract

All over the world, women's under-representation in politics has become a political issue, as this article has tried to show. During the last two decades, a large number of countries have been introduced quotas for women's reservation in public decision-making bodies. In the 19th century, women's question has brought as cultural project in social reform movement in India. After the independence women's question was subverted under the nationalist project. While Indian Constitution has provided women with important rights---- equality for women within the legal processes, right to vote etc. ---- the implementation of these rights was patchy and lacked state commitment. Further, secular character of the Indian state has been challenged by personal laws especially by Muslim Minority. This created a situation where the Indian Constitution reflects unequal gender relations on the one hand while state rhetoric continues to insist upon equality between men and women irrespective of caste, class, creed etc. on the other.

By 1992, 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution ratified 1/3 women's reservation in rural and urban democratic bodies. However, women's reservation bill of the proposed (108th Amendment of the Indian Constitution), is still pending due to political consensus. In conclusion, it is argued that women's reservation are to fulfill their potential for addressing women's exclusion from political life, women's struggle need to focus on women's effective political representation in near future.

Key Words: gender; reservation; rights; equality; power.

Women continue to face hindrances to their political participation, and are vastly under-represented in local and national governing bodies in India. During the last two decades, a large number of countries introduced women's reservation in public decision-making bodies through quotas across the world. Under-representation of women in public decision-making bodies is phenomenon of developing countries as well as developed ones. With the changing times, it is noticed by all that women are also stakeholders of development process which makes progressive nation in near future. Thus, women's inclusion in public bodies is need of the hour.

Indian socio-political milieu, women's representation is context-specific issue. However, Indian multicultural, multiethnic society has been divided by caste, class and different gender orientation. But what is common that is women are disadvantaged, marginalized and excluded category in the true sense of term.

Therefore, gender balance among political representatives is important for many reasons. It is to be mentioned that only about 16 percent of the world's parliamentarians are women, around 40 countries have introduced gender quotas in elections to national parliaments, either by means of constitutional amendment or by changing the electoral laws.

Nevertheless, gender quota provisions for women are often very discursive, the use of the quota tool to make historical leaps or jump starts in women's representation is becoming a new trend of global political order.

On the contrary, it is to be said that various international forum have been uphold that women's rights are considered as human rights. In this regard, the Beijing World Conference on women is the pioneer platform, emphasizing women's discrimination across the world. The Beijing Platform explores "discriminatory attitudes and practices" and "unequal power relations" which lead to the under-representation of women in arenas of political decision-making. This may be labeled a 'discourse of exclusion' (Dahlerup 2007:5). Further, this Beijing Platform also raised the demand for

equal representation, often expressed by the term gender balance, 'We Dos 50-50' campaign is one of the good examples of this is one of the good examples of this new discourse (Dahlerup2007:5). The goals of this Beijing Platform are 'equal participation' and 'equal distribution of power and decision-making at all levels' (Dahlerup2007:5).

It is to be mentioned that the Beijing Platform for Action also against the use of the term 'quota' because of its controversial notion in socio-political order. Rather, it is recommended that the world's government use 'specific targets and implementation measure'..... necessary through positive action' (FWCW, 1995, Art. 190).

On the whole, language is cautions, the Beijing Platform represents on the whole a new discourse, emphasizing on the mechanisms of exclusion through institutional practices, setting gender balance as the goal and demanding that governments and political parties commit themselves to affirmative action.

It is believed that gender quotas are accelerated more democratization, ensuring women's inclusion for democracy itself. It is also strengthen gender balance in political decision-making bodies.

However, International parliamentary Union (IPU) works for the enhancement and promotion of democracy through strengthening of the institution of Parliaments. The IPU also talks about real democracy based on the balanced participation by men and women in the management of public affairs. It is a true fact of any democracy around the world.

However, the Nordic Countries, such as Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden are well known for their higher women's representation in politics and their extended welfare states. The cause of their representation is gender quota. It is to be mentioned here that there is no legal quotas, only party quotas of political parties have used in incorporating women in public elections.

It is to be noted that South Asia has been experiencing different context with regard to women's representation through quotas. South Asia has produced many women leaders including Sirimavo Bandernayake of Srilanka, Indira Gandhi of India, youngest woman Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan and so on. In South Asian region 'quota' facilitates provision of special measure for women in public decision-making bodies.

In the Indian context, women's reservation has been politicized in many respects. It is aligned with equality, rights, representation and citizenship.

Therefore, women's reservation has gone through different consequences in the given socio-political order in Indian democracy.

By 1992, only 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution ratified 1/3 women's reservation in rural and urban democratic bodies. Even in most advanced countries world over women's representation is very low in democratic bodies. But in India, women's reservation bill of the proposed (108th Amendment of the Indian Constitution), is still pending which proposes to provide for thirty- three percent of all seats in the lower houses of Parliament of India, the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies to be reserved for women. The bill was first introduced in the Lok Sabha on September 12, 1996. Though the Bill is passed in the Rajya Sabha in 2010, but it is still pending in Lok Sabha because of lack of political consensus. So, it has been argued that women who constitute half of the population are lagging behind from democratic decision making institutions of India.

Against this backdrop, this paper tried to show debated aspects of women's reservation in since Independence era of Indian democracy. And, also highlights that how women's reservation effect empowerment of women in the highly hierarchical and patriarchal set-up of Indian socio-political milieu.

Women's Reservation in India: A Debate: Women's reservation is centering on various issues like equality, justice, citizenship etc. But effectiveness of women's reservation depends on socio-political order of a country. However, it is widely known that women's higher representation prevalent in Scandinavian countries in Europe. The feminist debates on gendered citizenship in Scandinavian one strongly influences by a specific social democratic model of citizenship. The citizenship question of Scandinavia based on socio-political inclusion and exclusion which emerged within the framework social movements. In other words, social movements are considered central agents of historical changes.

Nevertheless, equality is the cardinal principle of any democracy around the world. But male domination and socio-cultural ethos are major impediments in the way of women's effective representation in any democracy.

On the contrary, it is to be said that Nordic democracies have potential to accelerate the concept of 'state feminism' (Hegla Hernes 1987). Despite the traditional adherence male workers have the capacity to transform their public domain which is 'women friendly' in nature. State feminism is politics where women's political mobilization 'from below' combines with integration politics from above'. Apart from that men's monopolization of party politics was mere a problem for democracy than party politics was a problem for women. Haavio-Mannila et. Al (1985) in their book *unfinished democracy: Women in Nordic Politics* stated that injustices and inequality based on gender. Thus political scientist believed that set of values and benefits must be amalgamate with the political system. Otherwise, power and its unjust distribution will be distort the base of gender equality.

But in the Indian society have been gone through various discriminations against women since the inception of the state. In the 19th century, women's question has brought as cultural project in social reform movement in India. After the independence women's question was subverted under the nationalist project. While Indian Constitution has provided women with important rights---- equality for women within the legal processes, right to vote etc. ---- the implementation of these rights was patchy and lacked state commitment. Further, secular character of the Indian state has been challenged by personal laws especially by Muslim Minority. This created a situation where the Indian Constitution reflects unequal gender relations on the one hand while state rhetoric continues to insist upon equality between men and women irrespective of caste, class, creed etc on the other.

It is noteworthy that .Mahatma Gandhi played a crucial role in creating a favourable environment for women's participation in the freedom struggle movement by insisting that the struggle for women's equality was an integral part of the movement for Swaraj. Gandhi allowed women to take active part in the non-violent satyagraha for feminize the freedom movement rather than possible in more masculine –oriented movement based on violence (Kishwar 1996: 2868).

Though, proponents of reservation increases women's participation in politics. It enhances their empowerment in politics. At the same time opponents of reservation said that women's reservation opposes the principle equality and effective representation of women. Women are just acted as 'proxy' women in democratic bodies. Opponents also say that the legislation will only end in empowering "elitist women" while leaving behind women from lower castes and minorities like Muslims (<http://ibnlive.in.com/news/womens-reservation-views-for-and-against/111296-3.html>).

Soon after the independence, in the First Lok Sabha Election, women constituted not more than 4.4 percent of the total strength. This was at a time where there was thousands of outstanding women all over the country with the experience of the freedom movement behind them. Even within the Congress Party women found very little room in decision-making bodies. Even the women's front of the party also began to decline in importance especially after the passing of 'reformed' Hindu laws in the mid-1950s (Kishwar 1996: 2868).

However, women were less participated before 1990s Lok Sabha Election. Since 1990s women have been greater turn-out in the Election process in India(www.eci.gov.in). By 1992, the land mark 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have been included a large number of women in local level politics both in rural and urban bodies in Indian democracy. But the reality is that, they are nothing but silent spectators of those democratic bodies. Party politics, male dominated socio-cultural norms have been hindered in the way of their representation in such bodies. In other words, it represents women's descriptive representation in decision-making bodies (Pitkin 1967: 61). In this same vein celebrated scholar said that it is a inclusive marker of disadvantaged groups such as women, ethnic minority in a democracy. It is turned to be their politics of presence in decision –making bodies (Philips 1995: 55).

However, proposed 108th women's reservation bill is still pending due to lack political consensus. It is seeking 33 percent reservation in both national and state legislative assemblies. Issues of 'Quota within quota' means, 'sub reservation for SCs, STs, OBCs and Minority communities within the 33 percent quota'. This demand is also unconstitutional.

In case of Indian democracy, we have seen that women from political family got higher chances to enter into the political fore. But the democratic principle based on equality irrespective of caste, class,

sex and creed etc. Therefore, it can be argued that Indian democracy is hegemonic regarding gender, class and caste specific. In the words of Zoya Hasan:

“ From being acclaimed as a ‘revolution’ of the millions of deprived women, to being dubbed as the token ‘*biwi* (wife) *beti* (daughter) brigade’, women’s bid to challenge political monopolies and enter formal political institutions has generated much discussion, interest and opposition” (Hasan 2004: 405).

Recent trends: Though, 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments to the Indian Constitution have made remarkable move towards women’s empowerment through 1/3 rd seats for women’s reservation both in rural and urban bodies. It ensures mainly women’s proxy representation in local bodies. A few of them have tried to participate in public decision-making bodies. Patriarchal party domination is the major hinder in the way of women’s effective participation.

Later on, provision of 50 % seats for women’s reservation has been materialized in local bodies across India by amending Article 243 (D) to the Indian Constitution. But still women’s proxy representation is prevalent in democratic decision-making bodies.

However, the proposed 108th Women’s Reservation Bill has been undoubtedly one of the most controversial pieces of legislation to ever get passed in both of the houses in the Indian Parliament. It is one of the rarest occasions when a political consensus was reached among the three major political parties--- the Bhartiya Janata , the Congress, and the Left Parties. Passing the passage of the Women’s Reservation Bill in the Rajya Sabha is considered to be a trendsetter for women’s empowerment across the India.

But one of the challenges that the bill faces among other barriers is of course getting the Lok Sabha’s approval.

The passage of women’s reservation bill (108th Constitutional Amendment Bill) is very contestant issue in Indian socio-political milieu. This bill has been got response from different quarters. Feminists groups have given mixed responses of ‘quotas within quota’. Most women’s groups accept the principle of quotas within quota, but while some groups are prepared for a some groups are prepared for a redrafting of the present Bill to include such quotas, other like the Left groups, continue to insist that the Bill must be passed first, and further quotas can be worked out later (John 2000).

Rotating Constituencies or rotation of seats would be the another barrier of ineffective women’s reservation. However, the fact of the matter is in interest of democracy and that it is the duty of the incumbent to work towards the wellbeing of the constituency, irrespective of whether she would be elected next time or not.

Rotation of seats would also help in horizontal spread of women’s involvement in the political power structure of the country. The experienced members can seek acceptance from any other constituency. It is also true fact that experienced women elected members are more efficient than their newly appointed elected women members. It is the trend that women must be represented effectively in public bodies. Otherwise, if at all, mere women’s representation turned into their descriptive representation in public bodies.

Conclusion: The foregoing analysis reveals that gender quota increases women’s representation. ‘Quota’ has been used as a tool for incorporating women’s inclusion in decision-making bodies. But it is depending on the socio-political context of a country. There is a commonness regarding ‘quota’ that for and against arguments that quota are still surprisingly similar from country to country.

However, Indian context has demonstrated that ‘quota’ for women’s reservation includes more women in local self-governing bodies but at the same time they are excluded by the male-dominated political power structure. Even elected women representatives are still silent spectators in the socio-political order.

It is noteworthy that women’s reservation failed to remove some essential barriers like the local electoral campaign financing, the many imbalances between family life and politics, difficulties in attending meetings, etc.

Positively speaking, women’s reservations have the potential to kick-start other processes of empowerment of women. In other words, women’s political representation can be considered as precondition for women’s empowerment. It is also believed that more women’s access will enhance the quality of politics. Previously, politics is said to be specifically male domain in Indian socio-

political milieu. Now, it is expected that women's political participation is complemented to less dirty and less corrupt politics especially in the democratic countries like India. There is also a link between women's political empowerment and democracy. As S. Hassim (2003) observes that existing norms of citizenship are not only gendered, but 'classed', 'raced', and 'sexualized'. However, women's reservation through 'quota' may be reconstructed our society and opened up new opportunities for making a gender-inclusive society in near future.

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