



Women's Participation in Electoral Politics in India

Mothe Raju,

Dept of Political Science, Kakatiya University, Warangal

Abstract

The recent participation levels of women in formal politics in India reveal two positives that augur well. First, the upsurge among women voters that started in the 1990s reached the highest female turnout ever, so far, in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Second, women's participation in high-voltage election campaigns during the 2014 general elections also showed a substantial increase. However, the continued under-representation of women in legislative bodies and within the rank and file of political parties offsets the momentous gains made in the people-driven feminisation of electoral politics in India. Within a brief historical context identifying the beginnings of women's electoral participation in India, the article presents a time series analysis of women's voting patterns, showing that there have never been concerted efforts by political parties to mobilise female voters on any issue concerning women in either national or state level elections. Promises by political parties in their manifestos on gender issues remain clichéd and are conveniently forgotten after the hustings. India's failure to pass the Women's Reservation Bill is presented as the most telling testimony about lack of seriousness among political parties in taking better account of women's increasing electoral participation.

Keywords: affirmative action, elections, feminisation of politics, gender, India, politics, voting patterns, Women's Reservation Bill

Introduction

The intention behind the demand for an increase in the representation of women in electoral politics has been to not only ensure the physical presence of women in the political arena, but also influence a change in the dominant political discourse rife with opportunism, sexism and, hyper-masculinity. Incidents like Priyanka Chaturvedi's move from Congress to Shiv Sena, however, bring to attention a tragic irony. Chaturvedi, who left the Congress on grounds of inaction by the party on sexism and lumpenism against her, instead, chose to be co-opted by a political party that can hardly boast of a bright record on gender justice. While justifying her "move up the

ladder," Chaturvedi also reiterated her commitment to women's rights.

Such a move, though not in the least isolated, brings to focus the "new" normal of politics: a naked careerism bereft of principled or ethical stands, commitment, and guilt. It is important to interrogate this normality. This incident also reflects how parties may end up looking at their members as employees on a payroll, whose job is to market the party's brand and image. Such members could, however, not be considered politicians inasmuch as they are not expected to have any deep connect with people or even with the party's core beliefs and ideology. This also makes a



switch between parties normal as it is in a corporate culture.

What is also problematic in incidents like these is the use of the language of women's rights and feminism in a very limited and instrumental sense. Between an easy acceptance of the corrupt and misogynistic practices of politics and putting up a struggle against these, what is chosen implies how feminism is understood. A true understanding of feminism enables a possibility of a voice of departure and a different language of politics. This has been precisely the expectation behind the demand of enabling the increase in numbers of women representatives in legislature. Will the attitude of women politicians that they must "be like men to survive or progress," make any dent in the masculine political culture that is making it difficult for women to survive in the first place?

To ensure a presence of women representatives in the political arena, reservation for them is important. It gets highlighted by the fact that in the last Parliament, only 11% were women, with only one woman representative for more than 9 million women. Reservation also gains significance as the candidature of women by political parties remains limited. Parties tend to bank on celebrity status and "star value" of women candidates or their dynastic links. Most political parties neglect the women workers who work closely with communities and instead choose candidates on other bases of electability. Even if women get tickets, the odds are heavily weighed against them in elections, as they face a hostile, lecherous, and dominating male cadre, are caricatured and minutely scrutinised,

or are sexualised and glamorised. It is important, however, that women are able to break free from such a reduction of their personality themselves.

Even when women do get elected and gain political power, this power may not necessarily translate in their substantive participation in politics. This is quite evident in the fact that even parties headed by women leaders are not able to invert the entrenched misogyny. However, studies have also shown that increased representation of women at the local level of governance has brought about a change in the agendas and approach towards political work. It is an important question to ask: When women get elected, do they think differently, do they work differently to bring about substantive changes? Even though reservations can provide for the presence of women in the legislature, it is important for them to take the next step: the attempt to alter the dynamics of power in politics.

The number of women voters has been increasing. There is need for representatives who can raise and articulate their precise demands and create spaces for growth of a new political culture and groups. These representatives, for instance, can raise issues like the declining workforce participation rate of women and the two crore missing women in the electoral rolls, as these issues have a direct impact on women's representation in politics. They need to broaden the understanding of "women's issues," which are as much about the issue of polarisation of society as about the issue of gas cylinders.

To be truly representative, the voices of women from different constituencies and



backgrounds are needed, as they make space for a different mode of politics and new sensibilities. In addition to “lived experience,” what is needed is a belief in as well as the practice of values of democracy and feminism, and the posing of questions to forces that spread aggressive masculinity and militancy. A mere lip service to feminism or using it to enhance one’s image will not be of much help in ensuring change in attitudes. While increased presence of women can affect attitudinal changes, the effort should also be to resist enacting the same power culture in order to survive in what is considered to be the “hardcore man’s domain.”

Gender Justice

Judicial activism in recent years had led to ensuring greater equality for women before the law. Review of legislation from a gender perspective has begun to bring greater equality for women. Greater awareness among women; a stronger recognition of women’s rights, sustained public advocacy and effective judicial activism are beginning to show some results. The Supreme Court’s landmark judgement in 1997 on a writ petition by some women’s groups seeking the enforcement of the fundamental rights of working women has paved the way for their greater protection from sexual harassment. The Supreme Court in 1997, also announced a set of guidelines for sexual harassment for the first time. Court judgements have also started invoking international conventions like CEDAW to make a stronger case for women’s justice. Institutions like the National Commission for Women and the National Human Rights Commission are carrying out detailed investigations of injustice against women. Women are,

however virtually invisible in the political sphere. Under representation or invisibility of women in decision-making reinforces their deprivation, leading to an unequal distribution of resources, neglect of their interests, needs, perspectives and priorities and now say in policymaking. Their voices fall in deaf ears, and as Alida Brill vehemently insists, “Without our own voices being heard inside the government arenas and halls of public policy and debate, we are without the right of accountability— a basic entitlement of those who are governed”.

Markers of Women’s Engagement in Electoral Competitions

Taking a broader perspective, the participation of women in politics not only comprises interactions in elections but also involves participation in trade unions, co-operatives, women’s collectives, informal and formal politics. The term ‘political participation’ has been defined as a citizen’s active involvement with public institutions, including voting, candidacy, campaigning, occupying political office and/or lobbying individually or through membership in a group. This article uses the term in a much narrower sense, limited to women’s participation in formal electoral politics at state and national level in electoral competitions only. The engagement of women in electoral politics at the grassroots level of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has not been included here for two pertinent reasons. First, empirical data for women’s electoral participation in India are available mostly for state and national elections. Second, affirmative action regarding reservations of seats for women in PRIs has been implemented (Kishwar, 1996) and has to some extent corrected earlier prevailing



gender exclusions and disparities during the last two decades. However, an overview and qualitative analysis of the grassroots participation of women remains important to provide a more holistic picture of women's levels and patterns of participation in electoral competition. The assessment and efficacy of the electoral participation of women and their status compared to men in India are based on three parameters and markers. First, participation in elections as evidence of women's turnout as voters and their representation in the Lower House are analysed, based on time series data from India's Election Commission archives. This is supplemented by comparative analyses of seats allotted to women in general elections by the national political parties in the last three general elections in India. Second, women's electoral behaviours and attitudes are examined. This covers levels of women's political awareness, commitment and involvement in electoral politics, their autonomy and independence in electoral behaviour, plus choices and barriers that act as impediments for participating as active campaigners during elections. This parameter is scrutinised through election survey data made available by the Data Unit of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in Delhi. Third, the efficacy in electoral competitions is measured through an assessment of women's roles and efficiency in the electoral process and society's attitude to new political roles of women. This includes the extent of women's success as election candidates, the efficiency of the women's movement, the nature of leadership in political outfits and the effectiveness of campaigns for women's mobilisation, particularly on issues that directly concern them

generally and specifically as women ministers in the central government.

Women's Electoral Participation in India

A historical overview of women's rights generally (Kumar, 1997) and of participation in electoral competition both chronologically and thematically traces its origin to the Swadeshi movement in Bengal (1905-8), which marked the beginning of Indian women's participation in nationalist activities and also brought the question of women's suffrage and voting rights to the forefront. Tracing the origins of the women's suffrage movement in India, Forbes (1979) observes that the insistence of organised women to be treated as equals of men emerged not from perceptions of the needs of women in India but from the influence of certain British women. Thus, the origins of the movement for women's suffrage in India in the early twentieth century were replicated on the model of Britain and through the work of British women reformers living in India. The first demands for franchise arose in 1917 when the Women's Indian Association was set up in Madras with the primary focus of 'seeking an enlarged role for women in public life. Important literature covers how these efforts related to the nationalist movement and affected various parts of India. Eventually, the women's suffrage movement came to terms with nationalist concerns and suffragist ideals had to be justified in Indian terms and linked to the nationalist issues of political rights and colonial status that dominated public discourse in the 1920s and 1930s in India.

Barriers to Women's Participation in Elections



While the Constitution of India grants universal suffrage with equal rights to both men and women, existing societal values, the private–public divide in terms of domain identification and male preponderance in political institutions create roadblocks for women for exercising electoral rights and equal participation in elections. The lack of critical and quality representation of women in key decision-making positions results in women’s agenda not getting reflected and addressed in public policies and programmes. The public agenda of Indian men and women elected as people’s representatives is quite different and their priority of public works undertaken is also dissimilar. While elected women representatives addressed issues of long-term benefits, such as education, health, violence against women and basic amenities that affect the community, men concentrated on issues that needed immediate attention, such as roads, community and commercial centres, tanks and bridges (National Institute of Advanced Studies, 2002–03).

Where Women Succeeded

If we look around the world, we find that women have secured a strong political foothold only in those societies where institutions function according to well-defined democratic norms, where the crime, violence, and overall corruption levels are low, where decision-making is not concentrated in the hands of a few, and where citizens actively participate in local governance without needing to become full-time politicians. It is no coincidence that the representation of women is highest in the parliaments of the Scandinavian countries. By contrast, in the more macho and aggressive

political climate of the USA, women’s representation in the Senate is barely nine percent. This is despite the long history of the militant women’s movement in the United States. Apart from the above mentioned factors, family life in the Scandinavian countries has changed dramatically due to changes from above and below, allowing women relatively greater leisure and freedom. According to 1994 statistics, 66 percent of Swedish women in the age group 25-29 were never married or remained single. In the 40-49 age group this figure drops to 16 percent — still high by Indian standards, where marriage is nearly universal. This doesn’t count the people who are divorced and separated, but only those who remain single.

Conclusion

The democratic upsurge that started in India is likely to continue and despite some limitations of the electoral process, ‘people have succeeded in instituting their own democratic meaning in this process. The increased participation of women in formal politics reveals a process of feminisation of Indian politics with positive, people-driven developments that augur well for Indian women and for India. The participatory upsurge among women voters that started in the 1990s reached its crescendo in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections with a 65.6 per cent female turnout. The difference in male and female voter turnout has slimmed down to 1.5 per cent by 2014. This narrowing gender gap establishes beyond doubt that more women are exercising their electoral rights. Similarly, women’s participation in election campaigns increased significantly between 1999 and 2014. However, it is equally clear that this feminisation of Indian politics is



being resisted by the male-dominated political establishment and party personnel, apparatuses and procedures.

Given the electoral activism shown by Indian women themselves, however, affirmative action for women in legislative bodies seems to be the need of the hour and would go a long way in removing many obstacles that still inhibit women's participation in election competitions, bridging the existing gaps in electoral and political set-ups and improving the political representation of and by women in India. The political parties that played a destructive role in scuttling the Women's Reservation Bill in the last Lok Sabha have become redundant after the general elections in 2014. The current government has given a positive signal for women-inclusive politics, providing six cabinet ministerial positions to women, raising hopes that it would build an all-party consensus and pass the long-standing Bill in due course.

REFERENCES:

1. www.epw.in
2. V. S. Gupta, "Nation Building and Empowerment of Women", *Employment News*, 11-17 August, p.8, 2001.
3. Women and Men in Sweden: Facts and Figures, 1995. Gender Statistics Unit, Sweden, 1995
4. Shvedova, N. A., 1994. 'A Woman's Place: How the Media Works Against Women in Russia'. *Surviving Together*. Vol. 12, no. 2
5. Agarwal, Bina (1997) 'Editorial: Re-sounding the Alert—Gender, Resources and Community Action', *World Development*, 25(9): 1373–80.
6. Government of India (1974) *Towards Equality. Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India*. New Delhi: Ministry of Education and Social Welfare
7. Mazumdar, Vina (Ed.) (1979) *Symbols of Power: Studies on the Political Status of Women in India*. Bombay: Allied Publishers.
8. Palshikar, Suhas & Kumar, Sanjay (2004) 'Participatory Norm: How Broad-based is It?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39(51): 5412–17
9. Mukherjee, Geeta (1997) *Unite and Support of One-third Reservation for Women*. New Delhi: National Federation of Indian Women
10. Yadav, Yogendra (2000) 'Understanding the Second Democratic Upsurge'. In Francine R. Frankel, Zoya Hassan, Rajeev Bhargava & Balbeer Arora (Eds) *Transforming India* (pp. 120–45). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
11. Vyasulu, P. & Vyasulu, V. (1999) *Women in Panchayati Raj: Grassroots Democracy in India, Experience in Malgudi*. Background Paper No. 4. New Delhi: United Nations Development Programme
12. Narasimhan, Sakuntala (1999) *Empowering Women: An Alternative Strategy from Rural India*. New Delhi: SAGE