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**"POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS"**

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Political participation of Indian women, though in a miniature form, started with the freedom movement. Mahatma Gandhi was mostly instrumental for arousing political consciousness in the poor, illiterate women and making them take part in the freedom movement. Political participation may be defined as voluntary participation in political affairs through membership, voting and partaking in the activities of the political parties, legislative bodies and/or politically motivated movements. The Constitution of India guarantees adult franchise and provides the framework for women to participate actively in politics.

**KEY WORDS:** Political Participation, Legislative bodies, Political participation

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**INTRODUCTION**

The number of women filing their nomination papers in any election, national or State, is only a fraction of the corresponding number of men. Some withdraw at the last moment and the contesting candidates become fewer in number. Ultimately the number of women winning elections will be so small that their percentage in the legislative body will be nominal.

**THE ISSUES OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

It is said that behind every successful man there is a woman. Apart from the implicit, objectionable disintegration of women's status in a statement, it may be more appropriate, at least in so far as 'successful' men in politics are concerned, to say that for every successful man in politics there is a woman who was deprived of the chances (Karat, Brinda:2005).

Women represent more than half of the world's population and just less than half of the global electorate. Nevertheless, women constitute a marginal proportionate of representatives in the world's legislative bodies. India has of yet managed notably limited success in rectifying these imbalances, with women currently holding only 8% of parliamentary seats. Although India was one of the first democratic nations to grant women the vote, women are neither represented in the legislative spaces nor contributing towards the formation of national laws. Over five decades after the independence; numerous efforts have been made by the government and civil society to ameliorate the condition of women in various sphere of life. The main purpose was to raise their status in society, economy, polity and education, thereby according them equality, vis-vis their male counterparts. Despite many efforts, still a large segment of the women population is deprived of its basic human rights, i.e., the right to participate in the politics. Deprivation from this singular important reality of existence has kept women powerless for centuries and millennia. After the immediate independence, our social, political and economic situation were fragmented then ever before, but still many women from the educated class participated in the constituent assembly for drafting the new constitution for India. Woman's voices are too often unheard in decision making around the world. They remain under-represented in democratic institutions (only 15 percent of the world's parliamentarians are women) and women's organization often have little opportunity to influence policy dialogue. In some countries women are still unable to vote or stand for election.

Women make-up half the world's population. No country can afford to ignore the skills, talents and experiences of half its people. In addition institutions that exclude women's experiences and Perspective are likely to make decisions that do not take account of the reality of women's lives. Policies made in these circumstances are unlikely to meet women's needs. There is a growing recognition that democratic structures cannot claim to be truly representative of they fail to reflect the population they are intended to serve. The

goal of increasing women's representation in politics has been the subject of a number of international agreements and treaties. Although women's participation in democracy has been higher up the political agenda over the past ten years the actual proportion of women politicians remains low. Despite general acceptance of the need for a gender balance in decision making bodies at all levels, a gap between de jure and de facto equality has persisted. By March 2003 the world wide average for women's representation was 15.1 percent. Only 11 countries (Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Finland, and Norway, Iceland the Netherlands, South Africa, Costa Rica, Argentina and Mozambique) have met the 30 percent benchmark figure agreed at numerous international conferences over the last ten years.

However, there are signs that things are changing. A report by the United Nations Development Fund for women (UNIFEM) in May 2003 concluded that there had been 'encouraging signs of improvement in women's representation', particularly compared to relatively slow progress in the areas of education, literacy and employment. Improvements in women's representation do not happen by accident or as a result of a natural process of improvement as the overall status of women improves. The UNIFEM Report concluded that the differences between wealthy and poor countries in terms of women's equality did not hold true for women's political participation. Where women's representation is high this is often the result of sustained campaigning by activities inside and outside political parties for many years. Where these campaigns are successful they result in the use of positive action mechanism and other strategies to increase women's ability to participate.

#### **WOMEN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIAN POLITY AT NATIONAL LEVEL**

The Constituent Assembly of India was formed in December 1946 and 14 women were included as members. They were Ammu Swaminathan, Dakshayani Velayudhan and Durgabai Deshmukh from Madras, Hansa Mehta from Bombay, Malti Chowdhury from Orissa, Sucheta Kripalani, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Purnima Banerjee, Kamala Chaudhuri and Begum Aizaz Rasul from Uttar Pradesh, Sarojini Naidu from Bihar, begum Jahanara Shah Nawaz from Punjab and Lila Roy and Begum Ikramullah from Bengal (Kiran Devendra:1985:41). Indian women had been asking for the franchise and the constitution of India gave it to them willingly. This brought women on an equal footing with men. The adult franchise granted in article was the least the constitution makers could do to remove sex discrimination. The contribution of Sucheta Kripalani in the struggle for freedom is also worthy of note. She courted imprisonment for taking part in freedom struggle. She was elected as a member of Constituent Assembly in 1946. She was general secretary of Indian National Congress from 1958 to 1960, and Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh from 1963 to 1967. Sucheta Kripalani was in the words of Shrimati Indira Gandhi, "a person of rare courage and character who brought credit to Indian womanhood." Women all over the world have remained out of the political realm for quite a long time. For centuries, they were not welcomed at the helm of political affairs. Women's quest for full citizenship and participation in politics began during the eighteenth century Enlightenment. Changes began to appear gradually in recent decades particularly when women became assertive of their rights. They realized the need for redefining their traditional roles which prevented them from entering the arenas where men ruled the roost. Although women, to a great extent, succeeded in gaining acceptance and recognition, the scenario has not yet changed dramatically. Chowdhary et al who have studied the political affairs of women in 43 countries found that in no country did women have political status, access or influence equal to that of men. Though women constitute nearly half of the global population, their participation in political affairs has not been significant.

When compared with the other parts of the world, India's scenario in this regard is no exception. Women's Political participation has been very low despite their remarkable contribution in the socio-political struggles. In 1919, Sarojini Naidu headed a deputation of the women's India Association, which met the British Viceroy to demand the right to vote. The Indian National Congress supported woman suffrage. In 1950, soon after Indian independence, women were granted the right to vote but their representation in Lok Sabha, and other elected bodies has not been sufficient<sup>3</sup>. Women contesting elections still constitute only a trivial

percentage of the total number of contestant, e.g., in Lok Sabha, the representation of women varied between 3.4 percent (in the eighth Lok Sabha) and 8.1 percent (in the eighty Lok Sabha). In the first Lok Sabha, there were only 22 women members who formed only 4.41 percent of the total 499 members. The sixth sabha admitted the lowest number of women parliamentarians with 19 out of the total 44 members in a house of 544, not even 10 percent of the total strength, things was not different in Rajya Sabha. But still, the situation was somewhat better. In the Rajya Sabha, the representation of women was between 5.8 to 11.8 percent. The Percent of women in Rajya Sabha fluctuated around ten cent for at least five times during 1952-934. Ever since the National Perspective plan for women in 2001 was published, many non-governmental organization and others have been demanding increasing participation of women in politics, by way of representation in the national and state assemblies and other decision making bodies at the highest level. As in the fields of voting, candidature and representation in the Parliament and the state assemblies, women have not found adequate or proportional representation.

In the Past decade, it has been increasingly realized that the Participation of women is far from adequate, either by way of voter out or candidature. There have been fluctuations, though there is general trend of more women coming out to Vote. This increase in the turnout of women voters, particularly of the lower classes and castes from rural areas, can be attributed to a high degree of mobilization rather than to one's own political consciousness. This mobilization of women voters did not of course mean much of an increase in their participation in the decision-making process either at local, state or national level. Many studies on women in politics, however, had pointed out to the lack of their political empowerment and the limitations and challenges before them, disabling them from playing a decisive role in the political affairs of the country. There are numerous domestic and public factors that hinder women's chances in electoral battles of democracy<sup>5</sup>. For instance reluctance of political Parties and their leaders to give tickets to women aspirants, social norms and patterns, gender biases, familial restrictions, economics resources raising and funding capacities, political support from the party managers, cadre, tendencies of character assassination, subtle sexist propaganda and above all the voter's attitude towards women candidates etc.

The Percentage of elected women Lok Sabha members has never exceeded 10. The low participation of women by way of number of them nominated and elected had a dampening effect on the movement for political empowerment of women. It showed that the political system, even while conceding the role of women in local self government, was not ready to give them an access at the national level. Lack of political will and absence of commitment for women issues could not bring required determination. The Bill proposed reservation of 1/3 of constituencies for women, on the lines of that for SCs/STs, with a provision to rotate from with every election. But the mechanism was not free of flaws. As this would have meant that nearly half of the constituencies would have been reserved for one group or other. Rotation would have meant that at least two- thirds of the sitting MLAs and MPs would not go back to their constituency for re-election. This would have robbed our system of whatever accountability it has now. The election commission proposed yet another alternative, which was initially endorsed by National Perspective plan approved by Rajiv Gandhi and also by some social scientists and activities. This proposal involves a compulsory quota for women in party nominations. It meant that the political parties would be required to field at least a certain percentage of women candidates, but would be free to decide where to field them. Objections against his proposal has been that it would not guarantee 33 percent women running elections, as parties may give relatively weaker seats within each state and district to women, resulting in their subsequent defeat. A few observers considered this option as a better way of realizing the objectives.

The Report of the committee on the Status of Women Entitled Towards Equality (1974), concluded that women's impact on politics has been marginal, even through in sheer number they are large. As a remedial measure, the committee proposed that each political party set a quota for women candidates. The proposed 84<sup>th</sup> constitution Amendment Bill reserving 33 percent in Legislative Assemblies and in the Parliament, Unfortunately this bill is struggling to be passed. While many opposed the Bill openly when it was

introduced scores, of other members across all parties displayed an ambivalent behavior, voting against the Bill while supporting it publicly.

Although the number of Indian women in parliament has increased from 59 in 1998 to 70 in 2001, their share continues to be very low, representing only 8.5 percent of the total members in the Parliament in 2001. These trends points out clearly to the need for affirmative action besides addressing these issues in an expeditious way so that women's concerns gain political prominence and a fairly representative number of women are in a position not only at the grassroots level, but also at the state and national levels.

**Table –1.1**

**The total numbers of women contestants for the Lok Sabha seat during the period 1952-1999**

YEAR	TOTAL NUMBER CONTESTED	TOTAL WOMEN CONTESTED	NUMBER OF WOMEN MEMBERS	%OF THE TOTAL SEATS WOMEN
1952	499	51	22	4.4
1957	500	70	27	5.4
1962	503	68	34	6.7
1967	523	66	31	5.9
1971	521	86	22	4.2
1977	544	70	19	3.4
1980	544	142	28	7.9
1984	544	159	44	8.1
1989	517	189	27	5.3
1991	544	325	39	7.16
1996	543	491	39	7.18
1998	543	274	43	7.9
1999	543	247	48	8.9

The findings of a recent study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (1997) brings out this dimension vividly. The study shows that the percentage of women in world parliaments has dropped over the years. Their representation is quite disproportionate to their population. Strangely enough, ten parliaments in the world do not have even a single woman parliamentarian. According to the study, while there are 33,981 men parliamentarians in the world, the number of women is only 4,512 (13.28%). Further, only 7.7 per cent of the parliamentary group leaders are women, and only nine per cent of party spokespersons belong to the fairer sex. India's record in this regard is no exception. Although women constitute about half of the total electorate, their representation in Lok Sabha has not been adequate. Women contesting elections still constitute only a meagre percentage of one or two of the total number of contestants. For instance, in Lok Sabha, the representation of women varied between 3.4 per cent (in the sixth Lok Sabha) and 8.1 per cent (in the eighth Lok Sabha). In the first Lok Sabha, there were only 22 women members who formed only 4.41 per cent of the total 499 members. The Sixth Lok Sabha admitted the lowest number of women parliamentarians with 19 out of the total 544 (3.49%). The highest numbers of women members were found in the eighth Lok Sabha with 44 members in a house of 544. This did not form even ten per cent of the total strength. The present Lok Sabha has a women representation of only 7.4 per cent. Things were not different in Rajya Sabha either. In the Rajya Sabha, the representation of women was somewhere between 5.8 and 11.8 per cent. Compared to Lok Sabha the representation of women was slightly better in Rajya Sabha. The percentage of women in Rajya Sabha hovered around ten per cent, at least five times during 1952-93.

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS

Politics is directly related to governance and management of any society. Political power is necessary to formulate policies, laws and order for a state. Indian constitution provides provision for equal political participation of men and women in the process of formulation of government. But it is certainly not true in the case of women especially in a democratic country like India.

The state and its organizational entities impart equal role to women in decision making and policy formulation but some social and historical factors tends to create obstacles. In a democratic country like India both men and women are equally and legally eligible for political offices, in spite of the fact those women constitute half of the Indian population, the representatives of the women in state and central legislatures are very few. This void prevents the ideas & aspirations of half of the society to be expressed for the development of women of the whole nation.

The evolution of Indian democracy through fourteen general elections so far has reflected a low representation of women in parliament, state legislatures, political parties & other decision making bodies. The reasons behind are historical, social and cultural factors that have always restricted woman to utilize her capabilities and nurture her talent for the growth and development in almost every sphere of life. The preference for imparting education is given to men and women are considered as secondary for earning bread for the family, as a result there are fewer women in paid work force than men.

Women are paid less for the presumption that they work less. They are discriminated in land and property rights. They used to face violence inside & outside their families throughout their lives. These factors create negative social and legal environments for women and thus she tends to lose confidence and ability to efficiently work in public sphere. Whenever women are being discussed upon, statistics demonstrates very clear facts about condition of women in a particular region. For example in India , the declining sex ratio in India very well depict the low gender equity status as India ranks 113 in GDI (Gender Related Development Index).

The data also infer the increasing violence and crimes against women and their marginalized status in employment, education and health sectors. While literacy rate for women is only 53.7, as compared to 73.3 for men. Among SC/ST only 24% SC and 18% ST females can read and write.

By 1930, women had gained the right to vote. Women's participation in the national movement for the freedom of the country benefited them to gain some political and civil rights. Although they were not directly involved in the creation of new state and its and civil rights in independent India. Constitution guaranteed right to vote to elect the government to each woman of free India but representation of women in political parties, parliament and other decision making bodies remained low even after independence (Susheela Kaushik:1993 & Veena:1993).

The Power of decision making was approximately few and policy making was only limited to giving affirmation to the bill being to it due to tremendous political pressures and majority association with it. There was always a void between the formal idea of women's political participation and their meaningful use of power. The women who have been successfully politician are mostly from the families of great Political leaders or though male political patronage. In spite of that, very few women contest elections. Almost all parties hesitate to field women candidates. Women candidates are considered to be weak for promoting the interest of party at local, regional and national levels.

Women are considered incapable of convincing the laborers, workers, traders, government employees and general public that their interest and aspiration will be taken care off and duly implemented during their tenure period. This is the reason that in spite of their ability in administration and the art of political

articulation they could not reach higher level in politics. Few women reach to the position of cabinet ministers and they are generally assigned portfolios in the social service sectors of health, education, social welfare, child development etc.

Due to rise of various women movements in India during late 1980s, political parties started realizing the importance of women representation in their election manifestoes and the potential votes they carry behind them. However, these weighted fact did not convert into more seats for women in political bodies along with it, women issues were always despised within the agenda of the party and never translated to programmes, policies, and legislation of the government as a whole. Women are most far from the decision making position of most political parties. The women party leaders are meant to deal with women issues like dowry, rape, child & family and social taboos for procuring women votes for the party. They are used as instruments to gather support for all women of the society.

However, most women in India belong from rural areas, they are extremely backward and illiterate and quite immature to formulate decision for choosing government. They make their choice with support of male members of their families like husband or sons.

Various parties have made endless efforts to induct women at various levels of party organization. The CPI (communist party of India –Marxist) has inducted in its district committees & state level bodies. The BJP has been known to have highest percentage of women in parliament board and the election committee. The congress party led by a woman had only 10% of women among the candidates.

Some women leaders have important place in Indian politics. Today Jayalalitha as a leader of AIADMK, Mamta Bannerjee as a leader of Trinamul congress and Mayawati as a leader of Bahujan Samaj party are instances in point. These are the leaders who can influence the decision of their own party as well as the course of national politics. The role of Indra Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi within the congress party is well admired. Both of them well prove the fact that women in power do not confine themselves to women issues only.

The major role of women should be strengthened in local self government or panchayati raj system .The experience of the women in such local and remote regions is analytically measured in terms of social taboos, social legitimized, caste barrier and gender bias that they face during decision making and implementation of the laws at regional levels. Still women participation in building self government at the local level has increased due to certain factors. The village women have inculcated unanimous opinion in this regard, approximately about 40% of women to get into political bodies come from marginalized sections and committees. Although women from such weaker section of society are promoted to promote interest of the communities but this positive change in the society provide new kind of women experiment and intensive political participation at the grass root level.

**Table –1.2**  
**Women Representation in Lok Sabha**

Lok Sabha	year	Total seats (no.)	Members (no.) Males	Members (no.) Females	Percentage of Female Members to total
I	1952	499	477	22	4.41
II	1957	500	473	27	5.40
III	1962	503	469	34	6.76
IV	1967	523	492	31	5.93
V	1971	521	499	22	4.22
VI	1977	544	525	19	3.49

VII	1980	544	516	28	5.15
VIII	1984	544	500	44	8.09
IX	1989	517	460	27	5.22
X	1991	544	505	39	7.17
XI	1996	543	504	39	7.18
XII	1998	543	500	43	7.92
XIII	1999	543	494	49	9.02
XIV	2004	543	499	44	8.1

Source: 'Lok Sabha Members', Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi.

According to table –1.2 women representation in Lok Sabha statistics indicates that number of female participation in 1952 was 4.41%, year by year that percentage increased to 8.1 % by 2004. The lowest participation rate of women in Lok Sabha was in the year 1977 in 6<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha i.e. only 3.49%. The highest participation rate of women in Lok Sabha was in the year 1999 in 13<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha i.e. 9.02%.

**Table –1.3**  
**Women's Representation in Rajya Sabha**

Rajya sabha	year	Total Seats (no.)	Members (no.) Males	Members (no.) Females	Percentage of Female members to total
I	1952	219	203	16	7.31
II	1957	237	219	18	7.59
III	1962	238	220	18	7.56
IV	1967	240	220	20	8.33
V	1971	243	226	17	7.00
VI	1977	244	219	25	10.25
VII	1980	244	220	24	9.84
VIII	1984	244	216	28	11.48
IX	1989	245	221	24	9.80
X	1991	245	207	38	15.51
XI	1996	223	204	19	8.52
XII	1998	245	230	15	6.12
XIII	1999	245	226	19	7.76
XIV	2005	243	218	25	10.29
XIV	2006	242	218	24	9.92

Source: 'List of Members of Rajya Sabha', Rajya Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi.

According to table –1.3 women representation in Rajya Sabha statistics indicates that number of female participation in 1952 was 7.31%, year by year that percentage increased to 10.29 % by the year 2005. The lowest participation rate of women in Rajya Sabha was in the year 1998 in 12<sup>th</sup> Rajya Sabha i.e. only 6.12%. The highest participation rate of women in Rajya Sabha was in the year 1984 in 8<sup>th</sup> Rajya Sabha i.e. 11.48%.

If we compare both the situation in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha we can easily able to find out the participation level of women in Indian parliament was very minimal or dismal since the ages. It is the women's responsibility to increase the participation up to the standard level. At least 50 % of women participation is the need of an hour in Indian democracy.

## **PANCHAYATI RAJ AND THE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN, 73<sup>RD</sup> AMENDMENT ACT OF 1992**

This act has added part IX to the constitution of India. It is entitled as the panchayats, and consists of provisions from articles 243 to 243 O. In addition, this act has also added eleventh schedule to the constitution. The act provides the reservation of seats for the SC, ST, and women in all the three levels. Further the state legislature shall provide for the reservation of the seats for the offices of chairpersons in the panchayati at the village or any other level for the SCs and STs. Further not less than one –third of the seats of the reserved for the total number of offices of chair persons in the panchayats at each level shall be reserved for women.

## **74<sup>TH</sup> AMENDMENT ACT OF 1992**

This act has added part IX-A of the constitution of India. It is entitled as the municipalities and consists of provisions from article 243 P-TO-243ZG. In addition, the act also added twelfth schedule to the constitution. It contains 18 functional items of municipalities and deals with this article 243W. The act provides for the Reservation of seats for the schedule castes and the schedule tribes in every municipality in proportion of their population to the total population in the municipal area. Further, it provides reservation of not less than one-third of the total number of seats for women (including the number of seats for women belonging to SCs and STs). The state legislature may provide for the manner of reservation of offices of chairpersons in the municipalities for the SCs, the STs and the women. It may also make any provision for the reservation of seats in any municipality or offices of chairpersons in municipalities in favor of backward classes.

## **POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA**

At present article 330 of the constitution provides for the reservation of seats for schedule caste and schedule tribes in the house. Of the people; article 332 makes a similar in the state assemblies, while article 243 D does so at the panchayati raj level. This was fixed at 22.5 per cent of the total seats. Following the 73th amendment, providing for reservation for women at the panchayat level, clause 2 was added in this article, reserving one third seats for SC and ST women within SC and ST quota, and clause 3 reserved one third seats for women, including the number of seats reserved for Women, under SC and ST quota. In the other words, We can say, in a local body of 100 seats, 23 were reserved for SCs and STs, of which 7 or 8 would be adjusted to include the 7 SC/ST women.

The 33% seat reserved for women would also be adjusted to include the 7 SC/ST women seats, so that the general category of women reserved seats would come down from 33 to 26.

The new institutional arrangement in terms of 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendments providing uniform structure throughout the country is a historic step to liberate the women from the clutches of the big government and the total state system, yet it is not the product of popular demand but the arrangement thrust upon the people. Hence, it will take some time to secure the acceptance for the new system.

The most striking feature in regarding to 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendment is one third reservation of elected offices for women and for SCs and STs in proportion to their population. Representations of women and Dalit will certainly bring qualitative change in the functioning of panchayat. In initial stages, some cases of functioning by proxy may be reported, but once women taste, power they would assert their independence as it evident in case of west Bengal, Kerala, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and to certain extent Himachal Pradesh. The provision of women reservation for women will be only “naam ke waste”(just for name sake) and the women will be panchayats as proxies to their male counterparts. As a result of reservation, a large number of women belonging to SCs and STs has got an opportunity to participate in the decision making process.

The recent Constitutional amendments (73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments) however have brought about significant changes in the situation. With the advent of these Acts, today India has more than 500

district panchayats, around 5,100 block/taluka panchayats and about 2,25,000 village panchayats, 90 municipal corporations, 1,500 municipal councils, and 1,800 nagar panchayats. All these bodies would jointly elect three million representatives and a considerable number of them would be women. The trend owes impetus primarily to the provisions made in the Act that one-third of the seats (33.33 per cent) in the local bodies such as panchayats, nagarasabhas, municipalities and corporations shall be reserved for women. This one-third reservation means the possibility of one million women in the panchayats and municipalities of India. It is estimated that there are already 7,16,234 women in panchayats in all the States excluding Manipur, Bihar, and Jammu and Kashmir and several States went ahead and elected even more than one-third women members required under the Acts.

In Kerala, a State known for its socio economic, demographic and developmental features, a good proportion of women willingly exercise their franchise in elections. The State, in fact, has the highest percentage of women voting. The proportion of votes cast by women in the elections held in Kerala was around 50 per cent. This enthusiasm is however, absent when it comes to political participation. It is evident from the low proportion of women in the State Legislative Assembly and women representatives of Kerala in the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha and local bodies. In 1957, for instance, the number of women in the State Assembly was only six out of the total 121 members. In 1991, the number was eight in the house of 141. In the present Assembly, there are 13 women legislators; there is only a single woman among the twenty Members of Parliament (MP) elected in the recent 1998 Lok Sabha election. Kerala has a total of 2,001 women panchayat members. In the municipalities and corporations of Kerala, the elected women form 34.58 per cent i.e., hardly 1.25 per cent excess of the mandatory 33.33 per cent. However, to find adequate number of women to contest the elections was a difficult task for almost all the major political parties. This is clear from the total number of men and women candidates in the fray.

The figures indicate that women candidates in the fray (Gram Panchayat, Block Panchayat, District Panchayat, Municipalities and Municipal Corporations combined) were proportionately low. There were only 17,869 women against 40,220 men to contest the elections which is, hardly 31 per cent of the total number of the contestants.

The irony is that majority of them are housewives without having any interest in politics and public life being unlettered. Most of the women have no clear idea of their role as a member (functionary) of panchayat. Women panches and sarpanches, belonging to SC and ST, the leadership role is rather a curse and much worse than their upper caste counterparts for the apparent reason that the former is subjected to ostracism on caste grounds. The gram sabha is considered to act as a larger forum for the participation of all section of rural community. But rarely is it a matter of greater concern that women rarely. Participate in the Gram Sabhas to hesitation, traditional ideology and idealization of self-effacement. The gram sabhas cannot be considered more effective in the absence of active participation of women.

An assessment of the experience of women in panchayats does not show a mixed record with the prevalence of proxy politics quite dominant in some areas. But the overwhelming experience has been of the courage and tenacity of the women to effectively discharge their duty in the face of great odds. The law for reservation in panchayati raj and local bodies by enabling the entry of an estimated one million women into electoral politics at the local level has hit hard at prevailing social norms of a woman's place. There are deeply ingrained patriarchal mindsets at different levels of party hierarchies and a considerable effort and struggle by women's organization and women within political parties, made a commitment to support a constitutional provision for one third reservations for women (karat, Brinda:2005).

The government's effort to encourage participation of the weaker section and the downtrodden such as SC/ST and women is indeed commendable .yet, it must be remembered that such change cannot be brought

about overnight. This segment of society which has been subjected to exploitation for ages cannot break free of all the shackles of illiteracy, poverty and traditional at once.

According to the eighth five year plan, out of all the rural families in India, about 30 percent are matriarchal. Despite this, most women are uneducated, have little or no property and live in a traditional-bound society. In such a case, the politically powerful can make them contest elections for their own political gains. Hence, this provision would be really fruitful only if women (SC/ST) were given proper training in the working of political – administrative institutions. Elected leaders of local government institutions should be trained about their role and responsibilities. Women, SC and ST leaders should be imparted special training so that they acquire necessary knowledge, understanding, skills, and confidence for decision-making, implementation and evaluation.

## **MAHILA SAMAKHYA**

### **A Programme for Women's Empowerment**

The Mahila Samakhya programme, currently running in eight states of the country, is a programme of the Department of Education, Ministry of Human Resources Development, and Government of India. The MS programme was started as a consequence of the National Policy on Education formulated in 1986 after two years of intense debate and discussion. It was born out of the realization that despite the many developmental initiatives since independence, gender inequalities persisted in all spheres of development. Women remained exploited and oppressed. Poor rural women, regardless of caste and community, geography and state-wise development initiatives, remained the most powerless and marginalized group of all. The main objective of Mahila Samakhya is to reverse the processes responsible for the subordination of women, by empowering them with self esteem, and the knowledge with which to determine their own destinies. The unique feature of the MS programme is the emphasis given to changing these perceptions it is this rejection of victimhood which enables women to challenge patriarchal power equations in the family, community and society.

### **The MS Programme Structure**

The MS team consists of a cadre of highly motivated and innovatively trained women activists, known as Sahayoginis, each of whom works in approximately ten villages. Their motivational efforts enable groups of poor women to emerge as a sangha. In the early years of the programme, four or five sangha women were trained as **Sahayakis** (leaders) to sustain and further develop their sangha. Since 1999, more and more sangha women are sharing sangha work by forming issue-based committees of two or three sangha members. Each committee, as noted, handles a key area of concern such as education, health or legal literacy. The Sahayoginis are supported by the District Implementation Unit which has a district programme co-ordinator and four resource persons who form the programme team. They are assisted by administrative and financial functionaries. A State Programme Office with a state programme director and several resource persons and consultants co-ordinates the activities of the various District Implementation Units. Team members are selected both for their skills as well as their commitment to women's issues. The project document specifically mentions that project functionaries should be 'free of caste/community prejudices'. Thus MS team members belong to several caste and class backgrounds but this is not allowed to come in the way of working together. The nature of MS work makes for a close-knit team that shares a common vision and perspective. There is ongoing capacity building of the MS team, through action and reflection exercises, trainings, documentation workshops, reviews, analyses and the planning of field activities. The flexibility of the programme allows it to respond in innovative ways to problems in the field as well as to situations within the organization. A special feature of the Mahila Samakhya Programme is that it is an autonomous registered society, which functions more like an NGO than a government department. The participation of representatives from other education initiatives of the state government provides a support structure for the Mahila Samakhya programme. In addition, MS works closely with NGOs concerned with women's issues and draws on their rich expertise (Kapadia, Karin: 2002:300). The basic strategy of the MS programme is the building of village level sanghas or collectives. These sanghas provide women with time and space for

themselves. Women gather together at sangha meetings and engage in a process of collective reflection about their lives, in analyses of their problems, and in action. Sooner rather than later they begin to feel the possibility of changing their lives. The MS programme focuses on the poorest of poor women in the selected project areas. In most of the MS areas, the poorest of the poor are the scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribe (ST) women. (Kapadia, Karin: 2002:301).

These amendments became the impetus and, to an extent, the model for the recent Constitutional 81<sup>st</sup> Amendment Bill that sought to give women quotas in Parliament. It was ostensibly rejected due to disagreement on the question of 'quotas within the quota' for the representation of women from the Backward Classes and minorities. But the Amendment, in fact, had garnered opposition from most political parties. The states of the Indian federation were required constitutionally to pass their own panchayat legislation (Acts). Despite this, many avoided holding elections within the prescribed period and therefore did not transfer the powers deriving from the list of twenty-nine subjects or equip panchayats with financial resources. State action with respect to the devolution of powers and resources has been woefully inadequate.

Thus, although decentralized structures have been set up, this has not translated into local autonomy. The performance of different states has, on the whole been poor. While some, like Kerala, have a somewhat better record, others, like Bihar, have virtually nothing to offer. States like Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Karnataka fall somewhere between these two. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment is perceived by most states as the centre's baby, non-consensually thrust on them, and part of a covert, centralizing (rather than localizing) agenda. Interestingly, state elites who have been vociferous critics of centralizing trends within the structure and practice of the Indian federation are equally disinclined to accept the devolution of powers to the panchayats. The crucial question is: to what extent is the state committed to women's development? The Indian state has made several efforts in this regard and has attempted to collaborate with civil groups, as in its Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD) initiatives. WID emerged in the 1980s as an outcome of the UN Decade for Women (1976-85).

By this time, the marginalization of women by development processes had become evident. Policy efforts now began to concentrate on the need to integrate women into development rather than treat them as objects of development. The shift from Women in Development to Gender and Development (WID to GAD) in the 1990s came about as a result of a concerted effort to mainstream gender in state arenas. In India, two major programmes had been conceived in the 1980s as part of Women in Development initiatives, namely **Mahila Samakhya** (MS) and the **Women's Development Programme** (WDP). Both were grounded in an ideology that assumed the possibility of partnership with the state; the assumption was that even though the state was a patriarchal structure, it also had benevolent components that could help to further the cause of women's development.

While **Mahila Samakhya** was set up in many states, the **Women's Development Programme** was launched exclusively in the state of Rajasthan. It was founded on a triadic structure involving the state, NGOs and academics/universities. More specifically, these were the **Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD)** of Rajasthan, the state's Information Development and **Resources Agency (IDARA)** and the **Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur (IDS)**. (Kapadia Katrin 2002:398).

**The Women's Development Programme** was oriented towards achieving a shift in women's consciousness rather than towards the formation of self help groups that would foster economic self-reliance. The latter was the model that the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) programme represented. The WIG initiative was launched through women's quotas in panchayat institutions. In contrast to GAD where the focus was on the state and policy makers, WIG once again returns to society and focuses on the need to provide a space in the state apparatus for the untapped energy of its female members. (Mayaram in Kapadia, Karin 2002:399).

## **PROBLEMS FACED BY WOMAN PANCHAYAT REPRESENTATIVES**

The evidence detailed below belongs to Rajasthan but the conclusions are more general and can apply to other states as well. Many women representatives have been physically targeted. Misri Devi, a Mina tribal woman Sarpanch (chairperson) of gram panchayat Thikariya in Dausa district, was prevented from unfurling the national flag on Republic Day in 1998. A gang of four persons led by the former sarpanch attacked her. Shanti Devi, a Dalit sarpanch in Tonk district's gram panchayat Polyara was continually harassed for the entire term of four and a half years that she held office. Her clothes were ripped off her by the former Rajput sarpanch of her panchayat and later an attempt was made on her life when his son pursued her in the fields on a tractor. Bodily assault is one way of obstructing women's work; another is hampering them in discharging official duties and not allowing gram panchayats with women chairpersons to complete their work. The attempt to create hindrances is one of the most frequently used forms of obstruction. Jashoda Raigar of gram panchayat Baheted, Sawai Madhopur, is one of the new Dalit women chairpersons who have faced constant harassment after her election. Stones were flung at her and abuse hurled at her and her husband. They were even assaulted.

These stories reflect what is a common reality all over the country, where upper and dominant caste male leaders, who have held power for some time, prevent newly-elected women from working. Their initial expectation was, of course, that women would merely ratify their commands, while they would continue to wield real power, so they did not worry too much about them. The use of the disqualification/removal provision is another mode of opposition to women. Most state panchayat acts have instituted the provision of no-confidence motions (NCMs). For many women, however, the story is one of political exit. Take the case of Mausami Devi, the Dalit pradhan of Khandar, Sawai Madhopur district. The local BJP faction removed her despite the fact that she had joined their party. Mausami was unable to manage panchayat politics, she lacked literacy and political understanding, had no family connections and little political support, and had a poor self-image. Also she belonged to a poor, marginal, Dalit caste of washerpersons. Unlike Badhu Devi, Mausami was unable to fight back.

The two Dalit chairpersons who managed to survive were able to do so because they were backed by a major Dalit Caste. Further, there are attempts to create various obstacles for women. Holding panchayat meetings late at night is a strategy of gendered exclusion as women are often unable to attend. The pressures of corruption have generated considerable anxiety for women representatives. They find themselves under great pressure from their families in this respect. The question is: what can be done to prevent this backlash or at least to mitigate its impact? The first need is that of recognition. The backlash needs to be recognized as an assault on equal opportunity and equal dignity. The second need is for a thorough review of institutions, looking at their rules, norms and practices from a gendered perspective.

The lower level bureaucracy that deals with panchayat institutions is almost completely male-both in its composition and in its culture. There is a need for women's quotas here, as well as for an exposure to feminist ideas. The state institutions responsible for PR elections also leave much to be desired with respect to their collection and publication of sex- disaggregated data regarding panchayat representatives. We were unable to find statistics on the number (caste-wise) of women elected – even the election department did not have this. Similarly the Department of Panchayati Raj and Rural Development has insufficient statistics on the number of women disqualified/removed under the two-child norm through a no-confidence motion.

## **CONCLUSION AND FINDINGS**

There is an urgent need to correct this lack of sex/caste disaggregated data. The state and international agencies place a premium on 'training' women, but the entire apparatus of 'training' needs to be rethought. An alternative model of training would assume that there is no barrier between trainers and trainees and that

the elected women themselves can work as peer groups or as trainers for other women. Elected women have also expressed a need for knowledge of their rights.

There is a further need for regular dialogue to resolve problems between panchayat representatives and other elected representatives and members of the local bureaucracy. There are two models available for such dialogue. The first is a public hearing, as was held in Ajmer. The second is a dialogue organized by a third party. This has been developed at the Institute of Development Studies in Jaipur, over the past two decades. The first model is efficacious in terms of protest but tends to be confrontational. The second bring together state officials, members of civil society organizations, panchayati raj institutions and academics in a single forum.

The need for an association of women panchayat representatives is urgent and is begin increasingly articulated by them. The structure of such an association might be federated and decentralized, with scope for chairpersons, and members' associations at the village, block, district and division levels. An apex elected body could head a pyramidal structure. This could constitute a major pressure group with respect to the actual devolution of power by the state.

Women constitute 50% of the **women population**, but in India the participation of women is very minimal or dismal. The social sector women are unable to identify themselves as a work force in regional, state and national level. In fact the participation of women in political process is the pre-requisite for the political society. Patriarchal society and male domination are the main reason behind low or minimum participation of women. Human development report talks about the change in the context of women life and increased capacity for leading a fulfilling human life. It gets reflected in external qualities such as health, mobility, education and awareness, status in the family participation in decision making at level of material security. Approach to empowerment has under gone change from women welfare to women development process. Women should participate in functional, political and social processes of the state.

Selected indicators for measuring the impact of different level of participation includes economic independence, access to right to resources, economic opportunities, involving household decision making, political awareness and issues of public interest, voting, decision making, participation, relative participation, voice in public decision making, capability to influence the mind of people in the crowd, freedom to participate, ability to speak out , strengthen the association of women leaders and representatives at global, national ,regional and local level and on the whole to develop mechanism to facilitate the development of women in all sphere of life. Today we actually need a women revolution which will able to move women beyond a single minded emphasis on women's employment to giving centrality to women's ownership and control of land, means of production and politics.

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