

## RESERVATION FOR WOMEN IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS OF INDIA

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### Abstract

*About 50% of the population consists of women. They could bring about qualitative change in the governance of the country. Unfortunately women are not provided opportunities to take part effectively in the political process of India. Reservation for women could bring about opportunities for women to participate more effectively in the political process of India. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyze the importance of reservation for women under the headings women in the political process of India, reservation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, reservation in the Legislatures and proposed alternative Women's Reservation Bill.*

**Keywords:** *political process, Women's Reservation Bill, Reservation, parliamentary democracy, political parties, elections*

### Women in the Political Process of India

Till 1996, on an average, only 5.41 per cent member of Lok Sabha, the lower House of Parliament, happened to be women and the highest ever share was 7.7 per cent in 8<sup>th</sup> Parliament. Up to 1991, women's average share was just 9.38 per cent in the Rajya Sabha, the upper house. Till 1997 women's average representation was only 4 per cent in the State Assemblies. In the Central Council of Ministers only in 1961 women could cross 10 per cent share. If this overall scene is seen against increasing number of women and near parity in exercise of franchise scenario really gets harrowing. While marginalization of women in politics seems to be an universal phenomenon, what is more distressing is that India's record is more unpalatable compared to other developing countries. Whereas the average shares of women in executive and parliamentary posts is 5 and 10 per cent respectively in developing countries the corresponding figure for India is only 3 and 7 per cent.

Besides legislative seats, women are also utterly underrepresented in the higher decision making bodies of all political parties - in the Working Committee of the Congress, Parliamentary Board of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Central Committee of Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) women's proportion lingers around 10 per cent only. In some party committees women are virtually excluded and this often germinate in grumbling, though not loudly and frequently. Women may comprise a formidable section in the rank and file of almost all party but when their share in the decision making structure is peeped at, they become rare species. This aspect alone casts far-reaching consequences for women's ascendancy in politics.

Majority of women lack resources like economic assets and party support. In a parliamentary democracy, as elections are party based, women contestants in any type of elections has the real prospect in getting through only when they are supported and sponsored by the political parties. Because of the indifferent attitude of political parties in nominating women as candidates, women are less and less represented. Women are fewer in number in political positions simply because of lack of aspiration or their incapacity. In the party based elections, the entry of women mainly depends on the supportive gesture and ascriptive channels of parties and in these front woman candidates have to encounter apathy and disadvantages. Virtual absence of women in the policy-making Committees of the political parties obviously interdicts the possibility of woman candidates being nominated for any elections.

### **Reservation of Women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions**

In the traditional caste Panchayats, Village Panchayats and in the British scheme of local governments women remained entirely excluded. When we holistically look back at the involvement and participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions for the period at least up to 1993 one sordid saga unfolds. Except in Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Punjab where few women sometimes got selected as members, in other States the number of woman members were either nibbling or nil.

Since the establishment of Panchayati Raj in independent India, effort to secure and enable women to participate in the rural developmental process was evident. It was the Mehta Committee (1957), which recommended the co-option of two women from amongst those who were interested to work among women and children in each Panchayati Raj body in the suggested three tiers of Panchayati Raj. Mehta Committee (1978) also persisted with the incorporation of two women either through election or if necessary through co-option. The emphasis on and suggestion of integrating women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions was to empower them to raise any issue or voice their concern if they ever so felt or desired.

In establishing Panchayats, most State Governments appended the provision of co-option of two women in case no woman could come through direct elections. Prevalent practice during 1960's and 1970's was the co-option of two women at best for each Panchayati Raj body, as women could not come through elections.

Co-option of few women was the only available option for women to participate. It, instead, resulted in proverbial patronage of the dominant political and social groups and families. Those nominated women could not, nor were expected to free themselves from the clutches of the males who inducted them. As the family or the group utilized the co-option method to establish, further or retain their vested interests, it provided one convenient scope for the dominant caste/class leaders to install their family women such as wife or mother as their yoke and the very purpose of empowering women was led to fall flat.

Woman members consequently could not get any real occasion to take up the task or stamp their distinctiveness in the process. Those women were neither aware of their role or rights nor they could grasp the intricacies of Panchayati Raj process. They could not acquire political experience, take up status/programmes concerning women, articulate demands or represent their gender. Seen in overall perspective, women's contribution to the Panchayati Raj decision-making remained out-and-out in-consequential. Eventually the trifling number of woman members could not exercise power or gain political experience.

### **Reservation of Women in the Legislatures**

The ugly scenes and stalemate over tabling the Women's Reservation Bill in parliament have had a very beneficial effect. They have finally brought the grim truth into sharper focus that politics has proven to be very inhospitable for women in independent India. What we are witnessing today is a worrisome phenomenon of further decline in the participation of women, not only in our legislatures, but in many other of our political and public spaces. Most countries in the world have failed to give due space and empowerment to women in their political life. Women are moving in the direction of near equal participation in only a handful of countries, such as Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. In these societies women have begun to seriously alter the very nature of politics, making enduring, and substantial gains in every field. However, in all other countries, including the supposedly advanced democracies of western Europe and North America, where women exercise certain freedoms and have acquired the wherewithal for economic independence, female presence in legislatures remains small and relatively insignificant.

In India the problem for women is more serious for several reasons. They are while in many other countries women are inching forward, in India the participation of women in politics has

actually declined since the days of freedom movement, both in quantity and quality; Government and politics are more important factors in the economic, social, and power structures in India than in most other countries with stronger civil societies, and so, the effect of women's marginalisation in politics is even more detrimental here the increasing violence, sexual harassment and victimization of women at the ground level in many of our political parties have made their participation extremely hazardous now; and in order to increase the empowerment of women in the legislature, the 85th Constitutional Amendment Bill, introduced in Lok Sabha in December 1999. This Bill is seriously flawed, insofar as it mechanically provides for entry of women members to fill one-third of vacancies in Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas.

### **Proposed Alternative Women's Reservation Bill**

The important provisions of the proposed Alternative Bills are that a law should be enacted amending the Empowerment of the People Act, 1951, to make it mandatory for every recognized political party to nominate women candidates for election in one third of the constituencies; among seats reserved for SCs and STs also, one third of the candidates nominated by recognized parties shall be women; each party can choose where it wishes to nominate women candidates, duly taking local political and social factors into account; to prevent a party from nominating women candidates only in states or constituencies where the party's chances of winning election are weak, and to ensure an even spread of women candidates, the unit for consideration (the unit in which at least one out of the three party candidates shall be a woman) for the Lok Sabha shall be a state or union territory; for the State Legislative Assembly, the unit shall be a cluster of three contiguous Lok Sabha constituencies; in the event of any recognized party failing to nominate one-third women candidates, for the shortfall of every single woman candidate, two male candidates of the party shall lose the party symbol and affiliation and all the recognition related advantages; a law amending Articles 80 and 171 of the Constitution should be enacted providing for women's reservation of one-third of the seats, elected or nominated, to Rajya Sabha or Legislative Councils. Corresponding amendments need to be made in the Fourth Schedule of the Constitution and the Empowerment of the People Act, 1950.

### **Conclusion**

While it is necessary to institute a system of reservation for ensuring women's presence in the political process is not by itself sufficient if our objective is to make women equal partners in democratic politics. The problem is not just that women in the political arena are denied tickets by political parties. The fundamental problem is that given the nature of electoral politics today, the system itself creates insurmountable obstacles for women. Proposals for reservation of women must therefore be a part of a larger package of general reforms in electoral politics so that women will have opportunities to participate more effectively in the political process of India and could bring about qualitative change in the governance of the country.

### **References**

1. United Nation Development Programme, Human Development Report, New York Oxford University Press, 1995, p.62.
2. For the elaborate position of women in the different Committees of political parties see Seminar. September 1997, p.52.
3. In the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the CPM, Brinda Karat took exception to the appallingly low representation of women in the party committees and opted herself out of newly elected Central Committees as a mark of protest.
4. Nonetheless, one critical question is: if more and more women get entry into higher adoption making Committees of the parties or even women preside over the party do women have better prospect in securing fairer candidatures in any election? Presently Congress, AIADMK, Trinamul Congress (TMC) are revolving around Sonia Gandhi, Jayalalita and Mamata Banerjee respectively. These women are unquestionably supreme, they have absolute control over party affairs and they can handpick the list of contesting candidates for any election. Have woman candidates got wider scope in these parties? Unfortunately the situation for women is no better.