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Women participation

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Abstract

Political participation' has a very wide meaning. It is not only related to 'Right to Vote', but simultaneously relates to participation in: decision making process, political activism, political consciousness, etc. Women in India participate in voting, run for public offices and political parties at lower levels more than men. Political activism and voting are the strongest areas of women's political participation. To combat gender inequality in politics, the Indian Government has instituted reservations for seats in local governments. Women turnout during India's 2014 parliamentary general elections was 65.63%, compared to 67.09% turnout for men. India ranks 20th from the bottom in terms of representation of women in Parliament. Women have held the posts of president and prime minister in India, as well as chief ministers of various states. Indian voters have elected women to numerous state legislative assemblies and national parliament for many decades.

Keywords: Women participation, political activism, political consciousness

Introduction

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. With a decline in their status from the ancient to medieval times, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. In modern India, women have held high offices including that of the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Leader of the Opposition, Union Ministers, Chief Ministers and Governors. Women's rights are secured under the Constitution of India — mainly, equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination; further, India has various statutes governing the rights of women.

Constitutional Rights of Women

The Constitution of India establishes a parliamentary system of government, and guarantees its citizens the right to be elected, freedom of speech, freedom to assemble and form associations, and vote. The Constitution of India attempts to remove gender inequalities by banning discrimination based on sex and class, prohibiting human trafficking and forced labor, and reserving elected positions for women.

The Government of India directed state and local governments to promote equality by class and gender including equal pay and free legal aid, humane working conditions and maternity relief, rights to work and education, and raising the standard of living. Women were substantially involved in the Indian independence movement in the early 20th century and advocated for independence from Britain. Independence brought gender equality in the form of constitutional rights, but historically women's political participation has remained low.

Voting

The movement for women's suffrage began in the early 1900s in response to a national movement for suffrage, even though vast majority of neither men nor women had a right to vote during the British colonial rule before 1947. After Indian independence from Britain, the Indian Constitution in 1950 officially granted women and men suffrage. Prior to universal suffrage, provincial legislatures had granted women the right to vote.

In 1950, universal suffrage granted voting rights to all women. This is enshrined in Article 326 in our constitution. India is a parliamentary system with two houses: Lok Sabha (lower house) and Rajya Sabha (upper house). Rates of participation among women in 1962 were

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46.63% for Lok Sabha elections and rose to a high in 1984 of 58.60%. Male turnout during that same period was 63.31% in 1962 and 68.18% in 1984.

The gap between men and women voters has narrowed over time with a difference of 16.7% in 1962 to 4.4% in 2009. Voter turnout for national elections in the past 50 years has remained stagnant with turnout ranging between 50 to 60%. State elections have seen a growing trend in women's participation, and in some cases women's turnout is exceeding male turnout. Increased turnout of women was reported for the 2012 Vidhan Sabha elections (legislative/state assemblies) with states such as Uttar Pradesh reporting 58.82% to 60.29% turnout. In the 2013 assembly elections, women's overall turnout was reported to be 47.4%, and male turnout was 52.5%. Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Kerala, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Daman and Diu, and Pondicherry all reported higher turnouts among women than men in 2013.

Increased participation is occurring in both rich and poor states in India. The sex ratio of voters has improved from 715 female voters for every 1,000 male voters in the 1960s to 883 female voters in the 2000s [12]. The Election Commission of India (ECI) has sought to increase voter turnout by cleaning up electoral rolls and removing missing or deceased members. Voter outreach has included door-to-door voter registration, and in 2014 elections, voters will be issued a photo id with polling station information to increase voter turnout. Increased voter turnout in India is also partially due to the women voters. ECI has sought to encourage voter registration among women and participation through education and outreach on college and university campuses. Growing participation has also been attributed to increased security at polling stations.

2014 elections

Women turnout during India's 2014 parliamentary general elections was 65.63%, compared to 67.09% turnout for men. In 16 out of 29 states of India, more women voted than men. A total of 260.6 million women exercised their right to vote in April–May 2014 elections for India's parliament.

Challenges to Womens Participation

The level and forms of women's participation in politics is largely shaped by cultural and societal barriers in the form of violence, discrimination and illiteracy.

Sexual Violence

Martha Nussbaum highlighted a significant barrier to women's capability of participating in politics to be the threat of violence. Sexual violence in India is exacerbated by issues of education and marriage. Women are sexually abused. Child marriage, domestic violence and low literacy rates have lowered Indian women's economic opportunities and contributed to sexual violence in India. A 2011 study found, "24% of Indian men have committed sexual violence at some point in their lives, 20% have forced their partners to have sex with them...38% of men admitting they had physically abused their partners." Widespread sexual violence is attributed to the fact that violence within marriage is not against the law, and sexual violence goes largely unpunished. Martha C. Nussbaum states that "In the larger society, violence and the threat of violence affects many women's ability to participate actively in many forms of social and political relationship, to speak in public, to be recognized as dignified beings whose worth is equal to that of others. "Self-confidence is likely to

increase participation among Indian women, specifically in running for election.

Discrimination

Although the Constitution of India removed gender inequalities among caste and gender, discrimination continues to be a widespread barrier to women's political participation. A 2012 study of 3,000 Indian women found the barriers in participation, specifically in running for political office, in the form of illiteracy, work burdens within the household, and discriminatory attitudes towards women as leaders. Discriminatory attitudes manifest in the limitations presented to Indian women including low access to information and resources. Women rely on receiving information from family or village members, typically men. Women also lack leadership experience due to the fact they are burdened with household duties. The burden of household duties is a significant reason why many Indian women do not participate. Unlike men, there are fewer opportunities for women to get involved in organizations to gain leadership skills. There is little public space for them as men have dominated the political arena for many years in India.

Discrimination is further perpetuated by class. Dalit women, of the lowest caste in India, are continually discriminated against in running for public office. The Government of India requires reservation of seats for Dalits and Scheduled Castes, but women suffer from abuse and discrimination when serving as elected officials. Dalit women experience harassment by being denied information, ignored or silenced in meetings, and in some cases petitioned to be removed from their elected position.

Illiteracy

India has one of the largest illiterate populations. In January 2014, the United Nations reported 287 million adults in India are illiterate. Literacy among Indian women is 53.7%, which is much lower than literacy among men reported at 75.3%. Illiteracy limits the ability of women to understand the political system and issues. Problems with exploitation, such as women being left off of voters lists, have been reported as illiteracy limits the ability of women to ensure their political rights are exercised. Martha C. Nussbaum concerning political participation stated, "Because literacy is connected in general with the ability to move outside the home and to stand on one's own outside of it, it is also connected to the ability of women to meet and collaborate with other women." Studies conducted by Niraja Jayal and Nirmala Buch found women are "persistently mocked and devalued in the panchayats if they are illiterate." Nussbaum also found literacy can play a key role in the dignification and independence of women in politics by giving them access to communications, such as memos and newspapers, they can become better informed on political issues.

Conclusions

To overcome issues of discrimination and violence, women's organizations have focused on the empowerment of Indian women. Empowerment is tied to the support of family and improved status within the household, which is undermined by the threat of domestic and sexual violence. Socio-economic conditions, such as poverty and illiteracy, prevent the entrance of women into running for public office, and even voting. Inability to understand the rules of Panchayat Raj undermines the self-confidence to participation in public office. Empowerment of Indian women can also occur

through "bridging gaps in education, renegotiating gender roles, the gender division of labour and addressing biased attitudes." Women can also be empowered to participate by family, and when familial support is present they are more likely to run for office.

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