

## Women's Empowerment through Political Participation In Indian History

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### **Abstract**

*Political participation is the hallmark of a democratic setups. Effectiveness of democracy depends on the extent to which equal and Affective participation is provided to all its citizens. Women comprise about half of the population in India, this requires proper attention and due share in the political process. Citizens' active participation in political affairs strengthens the democratic fabric. Since women's presence is seemed to be low in Indian politics, it is the necessary to make women aware of their rights and motivate them for participation in mainstream politics. The constitution of India under articles 310 and 320 guarantee equal right to participate in political activities effectively. However, lack of space for participation in political process has not only resulted in their absence in numbers of decision making bodies but also neglect their common issues and problems. For strong and effective democratic system, the participation of women is essential. There cannot be any real democracy if the voices and issues of women are ignored or sidelined. This paper analyzes the participation of women in politics and also analyzes whether or not women's voices and demands are articulated to the public as matters of importance.*

*Keywords: empowerment, political participation, representation, position of women, democratic system.*

### **Introduction**

Democracy implies equality for all human persons, men and women. As against this basic notion of democracy what is normally seen is that women are excluded from different walks of life, more visibly in politics. The U.N. observes that women constitute “ world's largest excluded category”. For the attainment of true democratic spirit shall be ensured better political participation. “In the struggle for gender justice”, Usha Narayan argues, “ political participation constitutes the first and foremost step in the direction.”

Women's Empowerment as a phenomenon is not something absolutely new. It has been there throughout history in almost all societies for a variety of reasons. What could be considered as new is its increasingly coming out in Public, it's having been shifted and reshaped from welfare and their development to now women's empowerment, and it is being discussed, reported and critically evaluated. What is rather recent is the identification of the girl children and women as a special group and the acknowledgement internally of the importance of specific focus on the critical and key issues related with the empowerment of women. What is still more recent is the increasing realisation and recognition that empowering women is absolutely essential rather imperative, for familial, societal, national and international development and progress. It has also been realised and accepted that genuine commitment and efforts have to be made by each country at the government, non-government and individual levels to work, towards establishing women's empowerment as national and internationally discussed also in UN World Conference on Women and agreed upon the plan for Action.

The first ever world conference on women was held in Mexico in 1975 to address the issue of gender inequality. It was followed by a second world conference on women at Copenhagen in 1980 and a third in Nairobi in 1985. At the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (1992). World leaders accepted women's vital role in achieving sustainable development. At the world Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (1993). Governments acknowledged that women's rights are human and headed the Conference on population and Development in Cairo(1994), women's empowerment was recognized as a cornerstone for effective population policies. At the world Conference for social Development in Copenhagen(1995), gender equality was recognised as a prerequisite for the achievement of productive employment, social integration and poverty eradication. The fourth world conference on women took place in Beijing in September 1995 followed by Beijing +5 held in Geneva in 2000.

At Mexico, Copenhagen, Nairobi and Beijing the importance of issues related to the improvement of the status of women was stressed. From each of these global conference emerged a more powerful recognition of the crucial role of women in sustainable development and protecting the environment; of the human rights of women as an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights; of violence against women as an intolerable violation of these rights; of health, maternal care and family planning facilities, and of access to education and information, as essential to the exercise by women of their fundamental rights.

Indeed, in the United Nations the women's movement has a staunch ally. Starting from the assertion in the charter, calling for full equality of men and women, the United Nations has worked with the women's movement to realise this goal of the founding fathers. The Commission on the status of women was one of the first bodies established by the United Nations after its foundation. Over the past 40 years, world conferences on women, held in Mexico city, Copenhagen, Nairobi and Beijing, have contributed to the progressive strengthening of the legal, economic, social and political dimensions of the role of women. In 1979, the General Assembly adopted the landmark convention for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

Women in many parts of the world, lack agency, freedom and social opportunities that are essential for a better quality of life. Inequality of opportunity restricts the accumulation of human capital, labour-force participation, political participation and economic advancements ( Dreze and Sen, 2002.) Despite constituting half the population in the world, women hold only a fraction of political office. Leaders matter for growth and policy outcomes ( Jones & Olken, 2005), and political identity of the leader affects public spending (Hygiene, Tukiainen et al. 2018). The shortage of women's representation in political institutions may block agendas for the articulation of women's interest for access to social opportunities (Phillips, 1992). Scarce representation and political participation also inevitably makes the egalitarian nature of democracy questionable: representation, equity and participation being its pivotal quality (Dahl, 1998).

The affirmative action policy of introducing gender quotas have been shown to increase political participation. However, some find quota and competence to be incompatible in practice and hence counterproductive for policy making (Holzer & Neumark, 2000). In this paper, I argue that gender quotas not only have a substantive effect on political participation when men and women have different policy preferences. But they also outstretch and strike the root of gender inequality- uneven power relations, by giving women agency. I validate this by using country-specific academic evidence and demonstrating Indian as an example.

### **Political Participation:**

The concept of political participation is very commonly used in academic and non-academic discourses. For long time it has been considered very loosely and conventionally ; it was to be taken within the existing political order not beyond of it. This curtailed the way of alternative politics. As a political participation merely voting and the activities related to institutionalized politics, such as campaigning in elections, convincing others to vote, attending public meeting, distributing party literature, contributing money, contesting elections and so on, have been perceived as a political participation. Until the end of the 1960s, other kind of political activities such as strikes, demonstration, mass movements, marches were not considered as rational and political behavior at different walks of the academia. In many countries, this unconventional political participation has demonstrated an alternative means of representation of preferences and responsiveness. For instance, in Italy unconventional participation shifted from 'citizen oriented' to 'cause oriented'. This unconventional participation became an alternative to institutional politics to reject the corruption of Italian political order. The relevance of this new politics from below was given less importance across the world (Quaranta, 2015, Khanna 1930). The one of the first conceptualization of political participation has been done by Verba and Nie in 1972. They argued that the political participation refers to "those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly and at influencing the select of governmental personnel and / or the activities they take" it needs to be mentioned here that at the time political participation essentially meant related to institutionalized politics. Hereby, this conceptualization cut out a wide meaning and activities of political activities. Political participation is more than electoral politics therefore many authors went beyond this conceptualization. In 1979, Barnes and Kaise focused their study and mode and importance of it to further studies. They first systemically studied 'conventional' and 'unconventional' political participation. During defining 'conventional' political participation they included all the electoral activities such as reading and discussion about politics, contacting officials, work for the party and other electoral politics. On the other hand, in order to contemplating 'unconventional' participation they sum up all such types of activities either electoral or non-electoral behaviors, for example petitions, demonstrations, boycotts, rent or tax strikes, unofficial industrial strikes, occupations of buildings, blocking of traffic, unofficial industries, occupations of buildings, blocking of traffic, damage to property, and personal violence. As a consequence between 'conventional' and 'unconventional' politics, political

participation can be defined as- “all voluntary activities intended to influence either directly or indirectly political choices at various levels of the political system” .

### **Social Opportunities, Representation and Women’s Agency**

Social circumstances and public policy strongly influence the access to ‘social opportunities’ that improve the basic aspects of life, like , education, health, nutrition and participation in labour-workforce (Dreze and Sen, 2002). Political participation gives disadvantaged groups the power of ‘agency’ to influence policy- making and balance uneven social and economic structures. Agency is an individual’s ability to make choices and transform them into desired outcomes. Agency makes active agents of social change that can ‘alter the lives of both women and men’ (Sen, 1999).

The combination of persistent gender inequalities, deeply rooted in social structures that restrict women’s agency, and severe economic inequalities that adversely impact health, nutrition and survival, makes India is among the lowest in the world (0.93) and is particularly lower in regions with deeper unequal gender-relations. Female literacy has been found the have statistically significant effect on reduction of child mortality, fertility levels and female disadvantage in child survivals (Murthi et al, 1955). However, female literacy is low due to the low value attached to female education due to gender bias and the absence of women’s agency (Probe,1999). We care about political participation of women because it gives them access to basic education, basic health and to many, may ensure survival. An enquiry thus of gender quots and particularly is indispensable.

In academia, the concept of representation of argued both theoretically and empiricall. Pitkin’s (1967) seminal work explains that re-present or ‘not present but somehow present’ is the problem of the idea. Representation is descriptive: stands for a group by virtue of similar identity; and substantive: advance a group’s policy preference. She dismisses representation as leaders do not act as agents of people but simply instead of the. The focus should not be on who the representative is but on what they do (Pitkin,2004).

Hotelling’s (1929) “Principle of Minimum Differentiation” and Black (1948) and Downs (1957) “Median Voter Theorem” suggest that identity of leader does not matter. Decision makers driven by electoral competition will select moderate policies or outcomes preferred by the median voter. Even in redistributive politics, competing parties divert policy outcomes to the politically centred swing voters to win votes by diverting economic favours (Dixit & Londregan, 1996, Chandra, 2004). some argue that candidates matter, as citizens who chose to contest (if the costs of running are low) after winning implement policies they preferred most as citizens: ‘citizen-candidates’ model (Osborne 1996; Besley 1997). Phillips (1995) explains representation from a gendered perspective and argues that ‘presence’ of formally excluded groups is required for political deliberation to push their policy agendas. Quotas have also been credited to be a fast track to political participation ((Dahlerup, 2006). the demand for gender quatas relies on the

assumption that only presence of women can guarantee representation of women's interests, as men are either unable or unwilling to do so. Moreover, women's policy preference will ensure equity in social opportunities and agency for a better quality of life (Sen 1999).

68 percent of India's population is rural. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI), are the lowest tier of government. 73 Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992, decentralized political power of decision-making regarding the provision of public goods and services to the rural population and randomly reserved 33% to the seats of village chiefs to be contested by women.

Each Panchayat (village council) has 1000 villagers that elect a head Pradhan (Chief) by majority voting of the council. Panchayat prepares economic and social development plans, implements public services schemes and levies and collects local taxes. Government schemes sanctions grants. to them for infrastructure building (irrigation, drinking water, roads, repair of community buildings); welfare programs (widows's, old age, maternity pensions) and for the functioning of Panchayats. the Panchayat has complete flexibility and control in allocation these fund. This paper argues that Panchayat gender quotas have increased women's political participation both by increasing their presence (descriptive) and by representing their interests (substantive).

### **Randomized Policy Experiment in India**

The first evidence in favour of my argument is a direct country example. A randomized control trial was conducted on 265 village councils in two Indian states, West Bengal and Rajasthan, to test citizen-candidate framework (Osborne & Silvinski; 1996; Besly & Coate 1997) for analysis of quotas. The model is well suited for Panchayats due to citizens and candidate familiarity (Chattopadhyay & Duflo 2004). It also provides rationale in favour of women reservation, as women have much higher cost for running for office than men. The costs act as barriers to political participation for women, and therefore 'reservation can have a real effect' on public policy when women and men have different preferences' (p1415). The result shows that reservation shifts the outcomes to the left of median voter's preference from the male-biased preferences in the right. It improves both women's and median voter's utility. moreover, when more women contest, pro-women policies get implemented. Policy outcomes are robustly different and in favour of women in Panchayats that are reserved for women.

The study uses the data on formal requests and complaints made to the Chief, as a reasonable measure of the difference in interest at the household level. The probability of complaining depends on its cost. Reservation favours women because it reduces candidate's (women) cost of speaking for women. Data were randomly collected in two stages: Chief interviews and villager's survey. The means of outcomes of interest in reserved and unreserved panchayats were compared to obtain reduced form treatment effect of reservation.

Statistically significant estimates first indicate a net increase in political participation of women in reserved panchayats (from 6.8% to 9.8%). Second, the request of men and women drastically differ. Women lean towards drinking water, welfare programs, housing and electricity and men had the stronger request for roads. preferences directly reflect their household division of labour. Third, quotas affect public goods provision and resource allocation. Women chiefs invest in drinking water, schools and health. Fourth, women Chiefs are equally responsive to both men and women's requests. After controlling for the characteristics of the Chief which may affect the outcome (class, education, inexperience, political ambition, personal views and so on), there is no change in the interaction of women's reservation and intensity of women's preference. The results are also not affected by women's low or high re- election prospects.

Analysing the same random experiment Beaman & Duflo (2012) found that female leadership closed the gender gap in career aspirations and educational attainments. Women representatives have a role-model effect on adolescent girls. They spent less times on household chores, were more engaged socially, broke stereotypes regarding gender roles and exercised agency more openly political engagement or participation of village women in Panchayats also increased.

### **Effect on Competence in Sweden**

The second evidence comes from a Nordic country, where gender quotas have been significantly important in increasing political participation and attaining gender equality. The research conducted in 1993, on all politicians in seven parties of 290 municipalities, present strong evidence to refute the argument that quotas replace competent men with mediocre women legislators. The statistically significant finding indicates that quotas promote meritocracy (Besley et al. 2017).

The research measures private incomes (representatives of the Sweden policy keep their private job) of candidates, assuming that a voter prefers to be represented by the most competent legislator of similar social background. A person who earns more than the median earning of politicians with similar characteristics is categorized competent. The research finds robust evidence of mediocre leaders before quotas. After quotas, a higher female representation of 10 percentage points, on average raised the proportion of competent men by 3. Moreover, due to gender parity, incompetent men either resign or get kicked out of the system.

An annual cross- sectional regression between 1990 and 2012 is conducted, with subgroup and municipality fixed effects. With an increase in women representation, opposition to male leaders gets stronger, due to differing policy preferences, which leads to competence. Differences-in-differences confirm the robustness of the result. The one assumption of the model is that the leaders know the competence of followers-demand for effective policy.

The results are externally valid to India, as the women Chief in India knows the preferences or competence of their voters, the basic assumption of Sweden's research.



Moreover, competence in India is reflected by the demand for policies that bring social change and transformation. The results carry over, also due to the similarity of the administrative structure and power of the municipality.

### **Impact on Local Public Spending in Sweden**

The third evidence comes from Sweden too (Svaleryd,2009). Studying local spending patterns the research first looks at differences in preferences of men and women. Elected representatives in 25 municipalities in 1980 and 28 in 1993 are surveyed. A panel data regression, controlling for time-invariant differences across municipalities: municipality fixed effects and for common shocks over time across municipalities: time fixed effect is included, to obtain robust results. The estimates suggest that men and women have different preferences as their household responsibilities differ. Female representation leads to more public spending in the interest of women: education and childcare, confirming that women representation matter as they affect how resources are divided across public spending. The validity of this research for Indian is strong, as the public spending in favour of women's interest is based on the premise that household division of labour shape difference policy preference.

Moreover, this counterargument against my claim can be refuted for two reasons. First, the US survey sample is based on bigger cities with better-educated households that have net higher earning. Second, the small towns areas 'did not respond to the survey' (p26). This research exhibits selection bias as small towns and less privileged areas may present completely different policy preferences and expectation. Our, argument and claim is for regions where access to social opportunity, agency, public provision of goods are restricted, voters need basic health, education to be provided by the government and therefore require political representation to achieve equality of opportunity.

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