Women and Politics in India: Visions and Revisions

Dipanwita Pal
Galsi Mahavidyalaya, West Bengal, India

It is believed that the true meaning of Democracy could be found only when the rule-makers of the nation are chosen by the politically aware people. According to Aristotle, democracy is the worst form of government, because it is the rule of the illiterate and unaware people. It implies that for the successful running of a democratic set-up, the spread of education and consciousness are the basic crucial requirements. In this regard we may remember the observations of Lord Bryce, that the gift of the suffrage creates the will to use it, and the gift of knowledge creates the capacity to use this right in a proper way. Taking into account this view, the issue of the participation of women into politics has become imperative in the present global situation. This issue is intricately related to the increasing consciousness about eradicating inequalities, especially gender inequality, to cater to equal opportunities regarding sharing the resources and in the policy-making processes, which are the demands of the day. Within this paper I intend to study into the reality of women’s participation and the probable factors that withheld them from being actively involved into politics.

Keywords: democracy, women, attitudinal pattern, political effectiveness, role of the society

Introduction

It is believed that the true meaning of Democracy could be found only when the rule-makers of the nation are chosen by the politically aware people. According to Aristotle, democracy is the worst form of government, because it is the rule of the illiterate and unaware people. It implies that for the successful running of a democratic set-up, the spread of education and consciousness are the basic crucial requirements. In this regard we may remember the observations of Lord Bryce, that the gift of the suffrage creates the will to use it, and the gift of knowledge creates the capacity to use this right in a proper way. Taking into account this view, the issue of the participation of women into politics has become imperative in the present global situation. This issue is intricately related to the increasing consciousness about eradicating inequalities, especially gender inequality, to cater to equal opportunities regarding sharing the resources and in the policy-making processes, which are the demands of the day.

Laws have been implemented imparting equal opportunity regardless of gender in the political arena in almost all the countries. But in reality, it has failed to draw more and more women into active politics. This failure is due to the prevailing social obstacles and the attitude of the society towards women participating into politics. Society, that includes politicians and the administrators of different parties, even the women themselves, takes all the measures to create barricades on the way of the women towards active participation in the political affairs. McGlen and O’Connor (1983) argue that the right to run for office was not willingly

Dipanwita Pal, Ph.D., Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English, Galsi Mahavidyalaya, West Bengal, India.
According to the Ministry of Social and Women's Welfare, The Government of India, “Women and Political Participation” study might be helpful in this regard. The survey intends to study the level of representation of women in legislature. It also seeks to examine the levels of ordinary citizens and voters and their participation in politics. S. Sinha (1978) shows that most of the women, of both rural and urban areas, are completely unaware of the existence of the laws meant to protect their rights. Sirsikar (1978) observes, “Indian Society in the later half of the twentieth century, doesn’t look upon women’s participation with sympathy and understanding” (p. 81).

V. Sapiro (1983) advocates that the public and private sphere defines two-end points of value continuum, that formulates men’s and women’s relationship with politics. He identifies the difference between the political concerns of the two genders. While men are more interested in business, competition, and power-concerns, which are labelled a “public”, women are more keen on social welfare and nurture, labeled as “private”. It is quite obvious that the success of democracy depends upon considerable level of political interest, awareness, ambition, partisan preference, and the sense of political efficacy on the part of its people. And the whole phenomenon is intricately woven with the level of political participation of both men and women (Sapiro, 1983, pp. 30-31). This entire issue of the attitudinal pattern is intensely dependent upon political socialization. Jayashri Ghosh (2000) presents the real scenario with the help of a detailed survey report undertaken at different parts of Bengal. While surveying, she observes:

...there is no remarkable difference in the attitudinal pattern, between the male and the female respondents. It is true that in the other political spheres, women lag behind men, but is they have the same socio-economic environment, they behave in the same way as their counterparts, if not better. This reveals that the level of political maturity of women is not at all disappointing, compared to that of men. It is only their environment which makes women politically more backward than men. (Ghosh, 2000, p. 147)

Moreover, Ghosh (2000) notices that more than 72 per cent of the respondents involved in the survey, irrespective of gender, advocate for more and more participation of women in politics. Even after that, the question still remains whether they would like to see woman taking equally active role just like men or not. Perhaps, by participation in politics, most of them actually mean that women may take part in it, but from
within the confinement of their domestic arena. Most of them are in favour of the right to participate on the part of women, but that to be limited within exercising their voting rights once or twice a year, or, at the best, involved with the local politics, so that they need to be involved in public life minimally. This is of course the corollary of the patriarchal culture dominant in the society. And the tragedy is, even many of the women who are taking active role in the electoral politics, not necessarily think that “more women should run for public office in future” (McGlen & O’Connor, 1983, p. 117).

It has been seen that democracies which consist of more women at the centre of power, revenue more equitable societies with less corruption, emphasizing advancements in education, health issues, and infrastructure. The best example of this is the Ministry of Finland. The major part of it is formed by women performing as the ministers of different sectors, with the Prime Minister herself being a woman. And Finland has occupied the first place in the World Happiness Index for four consecutive years. In India, the nationalist movement influenced a remarkable number of women to actively participate in it. In this regard, we may remember the contribution of Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu. These legendary women played an enormous role in bringing common women into the arena of active politics from the bondage of the household. Naidu beseeched women to exploit their skill in “house-keeping” to keep the “nation house” in order (Kaur, 1968, p. 175). Mahatma Gandhi’s uncompromising attitude on the question of women’s right also played a very significant role in this issue.

We know that there are problems which exclusively women have to face whenever they aspire for participating actively in the electoral process. Despite that, it is extremely necessary that they come forward. In Indian constitution, women are imparted the right to vote, and thus replicate their political opinion. It also implies that women are imparted the opportunities to, rather rights to become political party supporters, activists, candidates in the electoral process, electoral officials and so on (Aciro-Lakor, 2011, p. 3) which are indeed more significant than just exercising the voting rights. In this regard, the political parties have an important role to play. They are the one who decode the candidates to be nominated from a particular region for the electoral process. Therefore, the role of the women in different political parties is the “key determinant of their prospects for political empowerment, particularly at the national level” (Ghosh, 2000, p. 194). Besides the responsibilities of the political parties in this regard, there are also opportunities where women can participate individually, especially at the local level. They can do this with the help of civil society organizations. Politics is not always favourable, even sometimes hostile to women, as it has been traditionally driven by men. Particularly the societies with strong orthodox patriarchal culture never welcome women into any kind of power-centre. Moreover, women generally come across practical obstacles on their way to active politics, namely lesser access to education, paucity of political knowledge due to less exposure to greater world, lack of financial resources, greater family responsibilities, etc. This is the reason why women long for the “political networks” that are needed for their political success in the game of power. This is the reason why most of the women, the few who can make their ways into it, come from the families of the male politicians.

Even after so many hurdles on the way of the women aspiring for an active political identity, the few who overcome all these issues have to face another level of difficulty—the tug-of-war between the role within the family and the newly emerging participatory social and political role. J. J. Kirkpatrick perceives:

Traditionally, there has been broad agreement among women and men about the incompatibility of women’s primary role and other roles in society (especially those involving autonomy and the exercise of power). Thus, the role of
wife/mother and professional has typically been seen as incompatible. Both roles have been defined as full-time, life-time jobs. This presumed incompatibility between wife/mother roles and professions (such as law) associated with politics has discouraged women from acquiring the training needed to become decision-makers. (Kirkpatrick, 1974, pp. 17-18)

Scholars mostly offer the explanation for lesser participation of women that they have extra responsibilities within the family restraining them from active politics. Generally, the women are compelled socially to believe that their primary duty of looking after the children and the household would suffer greatly due to their engagements in public affairs. In Indian society, the scenario is more so. To identify the actual nature of this participatory conflict, Ghosh (2000, p. 215) conducted a survey. She set a list of questions for both men and women legislators asking them:

1. Do/did you face any special problem to contest the election?
2. Do/did you face any special problem in discharging your duties as a representative?
3. Did/does your work as M.L.A. affect your domestic duties?
4. Do you think marriage as an obstruction towards participation in politics?
5. Do you think that your children are/were being neglected due to your participation in politics?

With a view to enhance the participation of women into the affairs of power and decision-making, resolution was approved at the fifty eighth session of General Assembly in 2003 urging Governments, the UN system NGOs, and other active bodies to develop a comprehensive bunch of politics and programs in order to accelerate women’s participation in policy-making. They urged those bodies to take necessary steps to act upon the hurdles that exist on the way to achieve this goal (6-8). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Article 7 appealed to the state parties to “take all appropriate measure to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and Public life of the country” (qtd in Ghosh, 2000, p. 236). It has been generally observed that men play an important role in influencing the thought-pattern of women, especially in the sphere of political behaviour. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) perceive: “for married women, the important male influential are their husbands while for the single women, fathers play the important role in opinion changes” (p. 151). But Ganguly has countered this view of Katz and Lazarsfield in 1979, arguing that this pattern is gradually changing. More and more women are now practicing substantial amount of autonomy in expressing their individual political opinions.

Lauren E. Duncan (2001) has pointed out a very significant aspect, and perhaps the root cause of this issue. She noted the political scientists engaged in women’s political behaviour looking for gender differences. And in their search for the differences, male behaviour was the norm. As a consequence, women were perceived as lacking behind in several aspects, like being less interested in politics, showing slower levels of political efficacy and such other things (Duncan, 2001, p. 818).

Studies in different levels show that disparity between women’s equality in theory and the same in practice do persist in almost all the societies. In West Bengal, India, the state that I belong to, only 12 per cent of the total MLAs are women, though women form almost fifty per cent of the total population. Most of the political parties are dominated by the male leaders, especially in the sphere of policy-making. Kirkpatrick remarks,

The women who rose into leadership roles report male efforts to freeze them out: and they report overcoming those obstacles. Most of the women legislators feel that members of their sex would be barred from the top office, e.g., Speaker, majority leader: male legislators interviewed in this study agree. (Kirkpatrick, 1974, p. 22)
It has been seen that the educated persons, i.e., the students and the persons who are involved in teaching profession possess a more favourable attitude towards the participation of women. Factors like economic dependence, domestic responsibility, illiteracy, lack of awareness influence women’s active participation in politics negatively. It is a fact that the women who are less educated than men, have less exposure to the outside world. Therefore, they have less knowledge of the political affairs around them. But when they have it, and begin to take interest in it, women have the capacity to build impressive differences in the arena of political affairs. In support of this statement, an account of the British Parliament (1918-1966) can be cited after Kirkpatrick,

If women have been remarkable for any particular qualities, it is perhaps for their high degree of dedication to their parliamentary duties and their high degree of independence and courage in expressing it. Even in the United States, where the participation of women is very low, it has been held that women in public office can be as logical and rational as men. (Kirkpatrick, 1976, p. 34)

In order to increase the number of women representatives in different levels of governance, many countries, including India, are introducing quotas or reservations for women. It compels the political parties to give a certain percentage of women the opportunity to nominate themselves as candidates for a certain governing body. In India, in Panchayats and Municipalities, reservation on 33 per cent of the total seats has been made mandatory for women. And this policy has resulted in creating a significant impact upon women empowerment in politics. Though there are some drawbacks in the process of implementation of it, overall, it maybe can be said to be successful in making visible impact. Now it is time to take such initiatives for the Assemblies and the Parliament elections too. On the issue of reservation for more and more women participation in electoral process, The Beijing Declaration sets out a goal of 30 per cent for female representation in government. A report published in Global Status of Women, issue 9, 2009, presents the actual picture of women participation in politics throughout the globe:

- Only 19 of 192 countries currently meet that goal.
- 18 per cent of government positions are filled by women worldwide. The growth rate in this regard is very slow and it has been estimated that it would take until 2045 to reach the set goal with the current rate of progress.
- The Nordic countries, Rwanda, and Argentina are the countries with the most female participation in the government offices, with Rwanda currently leading the world by ensuring highest percentage of female parliamentarians.
- Countries holding the low percentage of females in government offices are those in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Haiti (qtd in Ghosh, 2000, p. 190).

**Conclusion**

A number of feminist theorists have recognized male dominance of political institutions as a key obstacle to the equality of women. The atmosphere of the political institutions is not “gender-friendly”. This holds a large number of women from entering into political life. The meeting schedules of the political parties, sitting times in parliaments, lack of childcare facilities at most of the places etc. are some of them. It is very obvious that men have a very significant role to play in increasing women’s participation and representation in active politics. They should come forward and take initiatives for the same. They have to work for the removal of such inconveniences and make those places more workable for women.
References


