

POLITICS OF WOMEN RESERVATION IN INDIA

Dr. Surander Singh¹

The issue of women reservation and political participation always remains a burning topic of Indian polity at constitutional and extra constitutional levels. The issue of gender discrimination and gender inequality were discussed, debated and criticized by the academicians, intellectuals and social reformists in India. The issue started with the origin of inequality among male and female based on sex in the society. Historically, India is a traditional, conservative and male dominated society. The struggle for women participation in politics and governing process started during colonial era. During British rule, women had very less participation in politics and decision-making process. Due to the struggle of the women, in 1927 adult franchise was granted to a small number of women when the Madras state provincial legislature allowed them to vote.¹

The struggle for women empowerment and rights started in 20st century in India and abroad. It was started with the idea of reservation for women and this was rejected by women leaders as a retrograde step. This was expressed in the Joint Memorandum on the status of Indian women in the proposed New Constitution of India by All India Women Conference (AIWC), Women's Indian Association (WIA) and National Council of Women in India (NCWI) in 1930.² In 1939, a women's Sub Committee was appointed under the National Planning Committee of the All India Congress Committee to examine the role of Indian women and to make recommendations on their place in the planned economy of a free India. The members of the sub-committee endorsed the 1931 Fundamental Rights Resolution made at the Karachi Session of the Congress and rejected reserved seats for women.³

After independence the ongoing demand for reservation of seats for women in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies came to the fore mainly because of the fact that despite progressive changes in the society, the status and conditions of women has not changed. India is a multicultural, multireligious, multilinguistic and multiethnic society. It has been divided on the basis of various socio-economic grounds. But what is common is that, women are still disadvantaged, marginalized and excluded

¹ Associate Professor and Head, Department of political science, Gandhi Memorial National College, Ambala Cantt, Email: surandernain@rediffmail.com

category in the society. They are still suffering from various problems created by the socio-economic, cultural systems and the mind setup of male domination. Historically, origin of private property was one of the basic reasons of women's problems. Due to nature of production process, male established his control over means of production and other economic resources. The ownership over means of production further strengthens the dominance of male in all spheres of the society. After this change, male created social order and cultural setup as per his own convenience and supremacy. Due to this whole process the unjust social order started and it is still working in changed manner, even after independence.

India adopted Parliamentary democracy after independence. It was a step towards establishment of representative government. But parliamentary democracy has been an utter failure when it comes to women's representation. India is sadly at the 103rd place out of 140 countries with a mere 12% representation. Among the Asian countries India stands at the 13th position out of 18 countries while countries like South Sudan, Saudi Arabia have fared well in bringing women to parliament than India.⁴ It shows the nature of democratic political process in the country, which is again dominated by male than female.

In 1993, an attempt was made to provide reservation to women in local government bodies, by 73rd and 74th amendment act. The amendment acts provided 33 percent reservation to women in urban and rural local bodies. According to the 73rd Amendment, "not less than one third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to SCs and STs) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a panchayat. The office of the chairpersons in the panchayat at the village or any other level shall be reserved for the SCs / STs and women in such manner as the legislature of the state may, by less than one third of the total number of offices of Chairpersons in the panchayat at each level shall be reserved under this clause shall be allotted by rotation to different panchayats at each level".⁵

It was a right step to give women their share in decision making process at local level. The implementation of reservation at local level raised questions about the working and efficiency of women

representatives. It was observed that, due to various socio-economic reasons, women are working as a rubber stamp and the powers are used by their husband or male counterpart. It seems that they are nothing but silent spectators of those democratic bodies. Party politics, male dominated socio-cultural norms have been hindered in the way of their representation in such bodies. In other words, it represents women descriptive representation in decision-making bodies.

The bill for thirty three percent women reservation in Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies was first introduced in the Lok Sabha on September 12, 1996. Almost all the major political parties included the issue of reservation for women in their Party election manifestoes. But in practice each political party looked at the women as a vote bank. In the first session of the Parliament held after 1996 general elections, the United Front Government introduced the Bill as the Constitution (81st) Amendment Bill 1996. The Bill proposed to give reservation of one-third seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. There was enthusiasm and almost certainty that the Bill would be smoothly passed. The enthusiasm was so great that the women members in the Rajya Sabha pressed the Prime Minister to pass the Bill on that very day. The Prime Minister agreed. However, when the discussion began in the Lok Sabha and the Prime Minister was also present there; then situation turned out to be different. Leaders of Left Parties demanded immediate passage of the Bill but speakers belonging to other parties raised a number of points which showed that there was no unanimity on the subject. It became clear that the Bill for reservation for women would not be pressed for passage that day and the Prime minister proposed that the Bill be referred to a Joint Select Committee.

Therefore, the draft of the bill was prepared and presented in the house. But it was opposed and did not allow discussion on the bill in the Parliament. Left Parties, the Congress, the BJP and the Samta Party were all supporting the Bill and even declared to vote in favour of the Bill. The determined opposition of the three constituents of the United Front Government i.e. Samajwadi Party, Janta Dal and Rashtriya Janta Dal sealed the fate of the Bill at least in the Parliament session held in August-September 1997. Samajwadi Party under the leadership of Sh. Mulayam Singh Yadav argued that the quota of reservation should be reduced from 33 percent to 20 percent or below. It has put forward the demand that there should be a sub-quota for OBC women and minorities. Shri Mulayam Singh further suggested that the Constitution should be amended to make it imperative for political parties to reserve seats for

women. The suggestion on the part of Samajwadi Party and JD and RJD clearly indicate that they are against reservation of seats for women in the Parliament and State Legislatures. Ahead of the first Lok Sabha session of 2019, about 270 civil society activists have written to the Indian Law Minister, Ravi Shankar Prasad, urging him to “draft a proposal or revise the old draft of the Women’s Reservation Bill”, which had lapsed multiple times in the past three decades. With the rising concerns over the decreasing labor force participation rates and the increasing number of cases of violence against women, the country and its women are looking forward to the upcoming Lok Sabha sessions.⁶

Though the Bill is passed in the Rajya Sabha but it is still pending in Lok Sabha because of lack of political consensus. The politicization of reservation did not stop here but extended further and used as political instrument for vote politics.

In local government bodies working it was observed that female-led panchayats perform better in the long-term on an index of eight services—drinking water, toilets, gutters, schools, ration shops, self-help groups, implementation of welfare schemes and male alcoholism. After three years female-led panchayats perform slightly better than male-led panchayats, and significantly better after five years. Furthermore, the assessment suggests an increase in women’s political involvement on an index covering voting patterns, knowledge about rights and the functioning of the panchayat participation in village-level political and social activities.⁷ The observation made in the working of women in rural local-bodies in India shows that women are highly competent in their job and they can participate in politics as well. History is full of example when the women lead the country and gave a strong political leadership to the country.

Challenges to Women Reservation in Politics

The women reservation bill is very contestant issue in Indian socio-political milieu from its introduction. The bill has been got response from different quarters of society as per the agenda. Feminists groups have given mixed responses of “quotas within quota”. Most women groups accept the principle of quotas within quota, but while some groups are prepared for redrafting of the present Bill to include such quotas. Left groups, continue to insist that the Bill must be passed first, and other can be discussed later. Beside this, following are the basic challenges to women reservation and participation in politics:

Mindset of political elite class: The movement for women empowerment and political rights to the women started in 20st century during the colonial age, but women are still away from political participation and their role in decision-making process in Indian polity. The political elite class dominated by the male never allow the women participation in politics. It is the nature and working of elite class, that they never like any change in their position and power status. They always try to maintain status quo. They are the highly ambitious group of the society. Moreover, there is a feeling of insecurity and fear that due to reservation one may have to lose his own seat or constituency during the process of delimitation or allocation of constituency after reservation. If reservation takes place definitely the number of seats for existing male representatives will be less. The bill for reservation for women in parliament and state legislative assemblies was placed in parliament with the promise of all political parties. Without much discussion the bill was handed over to one of the committees of parliament for discussion. It was a delay tactics to avoid the amendment bill regarding the reservation. Due to this mindset of political elite class, women reservation always remains in the manifestos of all political parties but none of the political parties try to practice it.

Lack of Economic Resources; Economic factor is the most important determinant of the status of the individual in the society. Basically, gender discrimination started with the origin of private property in the society. Due to the nature of production process, male members establish their control over means of production in the society. This ownership over means of production or economic resources lead to further inequality and exploitation in social, cultural and other fields of life in society. It is being argued that, the expansion of education and growth of science and technology in the post-independence era, has changed economic status of women. But still majority of the women are dependent on men for their livelihood and other basic needs. The change is limited only to the highly educated women of rich families. Though economic backwardness is one of the reasons for the demand of the reservation to women in politics, but it is also one of the weak areas related to the status and dignity of the women. It is important to restructure the economic system (economic sources) of the country to eradicate the gender discrimination from the society.

Unjust Social Order: India is a multidimensional society with different caste, religion and language etc. The traditional and conservative nature of the social order is also one of the hurdles in the political participation of the women. Social injustice, inequality and gender discrimination exists even after more

than seven decades of independence. India is a traditional and conservative society. The well rooted traditions, customs and rituals never allow women to go out and take part in political activities or any decision-making process. Beside this, the mind set of males is a biggest challenge for women's political participation. It has been established that women are limited only to the house hold and they may not be allowed to take part in the political processes. Male participates in place of female in political activities. Husband attend meetings and take decisions on the behalf of their wife, as wife is not allowed to take part in public meetings due to *Pardda Paratha* and other social customs. Therefore, male domination and socio-cultural ethos are major impediments in the way of women effective representation in Indian democracy.

Constitutional or Legal Dimensions: Indian political system and governing process is governed and organised by the Indian constitution. The constitution was framed by the constituent assembly with certain objectives and goals. It is the main source of authority and governance in the Indian polity. It has provision for fundamental rights and directive principles for the citizens. But there is a gap between theory and practice regarding the implementation of the constitutional provisions regarding the rights. It provides right to equality (from article 14 to 18) to all men and women in chapter III. But practically there is a lack of equality among the male and female. Discussion and debate on gender discrimination is enough evident in this regard. There is a need to create better living conditions so that rights can be enjoyed by all citizens.

Conclusion: Women reservation is the key to women empowerment in India. The issue of women reservation and more rights and powers to women started women movements during British era. After independence the Indian constitution provides various rights and duties to women. After independence, due to educational, technological, scientific and other development, various changes take place in the country. But no big change takes place in role and status of women in politics in general. Due to various political, socio-economic and cultural and other reasons women participation in politics and decision-making process is very less. Basically, the issue of women reservation has been politicized by the political elites of the country for their own political benefits. There is a need to change the mindset of the male dominated society and economic structure of the country.

References:

¹ . shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/16509/14/14_chapter%204.pdf

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Nagurag Reena, "Womentaking on challenges of politics are changing of India's future", <https://www.shethepeople.tv/top-stories/women-challenges-politics-changing-indias-future/>

⁵ shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/

⁶ "Why the women reservation bill is the need of the hour", <https://feminisminindia.com/2019/06/18/women-reservation-bill/>

⁷ For details see, "why India needs women reservation bill", Oxfam India policy.