

Evolution of Women's Participation in Indian Political Activities: A glance of Tamil Nadu

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Abstract— The Constitution of India is based on the principles of equality and it guarantee equality before law and equal protection to all citizens. It not only guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms, but also prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, and place of birth. However, these rights have remained de jure and have not been translated into de facto rights. As such, women have been denied social, economic, civil and political rights in many spheres.

An important area where women have been inadequately represented is in the political sphere. Articles 325 and 326 of the India Constitution guaranteed political equality, equal right to participation in political activities and right to vote respectively. While the latter has been accessed, exercised and enjoyed by a large number of women, the former i.e., right to equal political participation is still a distant dream. Lack of space for participation in political bodies has not only resulted in their presence in meagre numbers in these decision making bodies but also in the neglect of their issues and experiences in policy making.

Keywords— *Self-Government, Women's Reservation, Mahalir Thittam*

1. Introduction

The roots of women's participation in politics can be traced back to the nineteenth century reform movement. This movement emerged as a result of conflict between the Indian bourgeoisies, trying to wrest control from the British. This class made attempts to reform it, mainly by campaigning against caste, polytheism, idolatry, animism, purdha, child marriage, and sati etc., perceived as elements of primitive identity. Raja Ram Mohan Roy focused on two issues, namely women's education and abolition of sati. In the early 1850s, a campaign on widow remarriage was launched resulting in the passage of a Bill in 1856, which allowed widow remarriage. [1]. This Bill though helped the situation of widows, denied them the right to their husbands' or his family's properties. Several eminent women reformers participated in this movement as well as in the religious reform movement of this period. Pandit Ramabai, Manorama Majumdar, Sarala Debi Goshal who started Bharata Stree Mahamandal for the education of

women, Swarna Kumari Debi who started the women's organisation Sakhi Samiti in 1886 for widows are few examples. These activities gave momentum to women's participation in public spaces, which paved the way for their entry into the independence struggle. Swarna Kumari Debi, one of the two delegates elected from Bengal to represent the State at the 1890 Congress session is a case in point [2].

2. Women in Independent India

Though the foundation for political participation of women was laid down during the nationalist movement, there was no follow up or concerted effort to broaden the political base by incorporating women into political processes after independence. [3] The space for women in the political arena has declined since independence and their participation in politics has been limited to family connections rather than convictions and commitment. Women have been promoted to political positions only when there were no other male members available to continue the family's distinctive place.

3. Women in Local Self-Government

In December 1992 Our Indian Parliament passed the Seventy-Third Amendment to the Indian Constitution and the Amendment came into effect from 24 April 1993. The purpose of this amendment was to revitalize local self-governing village councils. This Amendment has been considered historic and one of the most significant attempts at transforming the Indian polity in the direction of greater democratization and decentralization of powers. [3].

4. Women in Local Self-Governing Institutions

The most significant feature has been bringing about a certain uniformity regarding representation of the weaker sections. While reservation of seats for scheduled castes and tribes has been written into the constitution from the very outset, the reservation for women is new and the most important contribution of the amendment. According to many analysts, it has brought a critical mass of women to these institutions and holds forth tremendous potential. In 1994 and 1995, the first round of elections to the

panchayats was held and nearly one million women entered the threshold of political institutions of local self-government. The second round of elections to the local bodies was concluded in 2000 [4].

What has been the experience of women's participation for the first time in these institutions, both in terms of transforming these institutions and for the women themselves? This will have to be assessed in terms of India's traditional social structure, which is characterized by a socially legitimized hierarchy, based on the caste system, an integral element of which has been gender discrimination. The caste-based social order still holds its sway in India's society and politics, in spite of the fact that the Indian constitution is a democratic constitution which upholds equality of all and forbids discrimination on the basis of caste, class, creed or gender.

5. Women's Reservation Bill

The Eighty-Fourth Constitution Amendment Bill meant to provide one-third reservation of seats to women in state and central legislative bodies and the current discussions and controversies around it mirror the contradictions of Indian society and the contestations in access to power and resources between those who have been traditionally excluded and the socially and politically dominant sections of Indian society. The Women's Reservation Bill once again throws up questions of certain kinds of identity, specifically caste and religious identity, the intermeshing of gender identity with caste and religion and their articulation in the public realm, in the field of politics. What is significant is the sea change in the attitude to the question of women's reservation among leading women's organizations and activists in key periods in the 1930s, 1970s and the 1990s. The core questions to our mind relate to the hierarchy of Indian society and the manner in which this hierarchy operates in the field of politics and political representation. [5][6]. It also raises questions about the nature of representation.

6. Entry of Women into local government bodies in Tamil Nadu

The new constitutional provisions have led to a massive entry of women into local government bodies starting in the mid-1990s. It comes with provisions for decentralization of finance and decision-making in local government, which, however, has not taken off in most states, with Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura being the exceptions. It also prescribes reservations for the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes. These changes have led to a renewed interest and competition in local elections. Tamil Nadu belongs to that part of India that has experienced fairly stable economic growth and social development for the past 25 years. In the study of six

villages in Karur and Tiruchirapalli districts. Many developments in various ways were noted. The most important findings relate to a doubling of average real incomes, rapid growth of non-farm activities and a reduction of inequality in terms of operated area and income among the land operating agrarian households in our sample. Two most important driving forces have been identified in this transformation as industrialization with its side effects and State social policy interventions. [7].

7. Mahalir Thittam

Self -Help Group (SHG) is a homogeneous group of poor, women, users etc. This group is a voluntary one, formed on areas of common interest so that they can think, organize and operate for their own development. SHGs function on the basis of co-operative principles and provide a forum for members to extend support to each other. SHGs play a crucial role in improving the savings and credit and also in reducing poverty and social inequalities. They can play pivotal role in:

1. Preventing exploitation of the poorer sections by creating self-reliance.
2. Building leadership qualities among group members.
3. Helping group members in documentation for obtaining credit.
4. Motivating members for prompt repayment of credit.
5. Providing training to its members. [8]

8. Women's Empowerment through Self Help Group

Whether in mixed caste groups or single caste groups, it is quite clear that women get into a new experience by regularly going out of their houses and participating in meetings with other women even during evening hours. In achieving this, they have overcome some initial resistance from their husbands and cooperate better in this regard.

Through the SHG experience, women learn how to conduct a meeting. They meet with local Government officials and members of Panchayat boards. Some of them especially the group leaders learn how to make money transactions in a Bank. In the literature, this has been taken by some writers to mean a building up of women's empowerment in terms of independence and self-confidence and their thrift as entrepreneurs. Micro-credit distributed to SHGS of women, often through intermediaries, has been implemented in many parts of Tamil Nadu. In six villages, SHGS have a strong presence, covering about half of all households. Many of the SHGS seem to function well. They gather women outside their own homes in meetings, where not only credit but also community concerns such as drinking water, street lights,

crèches and schools are discussed. They SHGS also provide a platform for women's active participation in local politics. But these aspects should not be exaggerated, as their effects are fairly modest. [9].

9. Conclusion

SPECIAL INITIATIVES FOR WOMEN

National Commission for Women

In January 1992, the Government set-up this statutory body with a specific mandate to study and monitor all matters relating to the constitutional and legal safeguards provided for women, review the existing legislation to suggest amendments wherever necessary, etc.

The National Plan of Action for the Girl Child (1991-2000)

The plan of Action is to ensure survival, protection and development of the girl child with the ultimate objective of building up a better future for the girl child.

National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001

The Department of Women & Child Development in the Ministry of Human Resource Development has prepared a "National Policy for the Empowerment of Women" in the year 2001. The goal of this policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. This reveals that the entry of women into political institutions have changed the atmosphere more positively

and has made it more transparent and accountable. If affirmative action has a positive influence on the environment, it is all the more reason that the same would happen at the higher levels of governance.

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