

Gender Quotas and Political Representation of Women in India: Caste and Religious Perspectives in WRB.

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Abstract:

Political Equality is the core value of the democracy. It can be achieved only when all the groups of the society appropriately represented in the national legislature. But women being the largest marginal section of the society, their representation never reached the critical mass in the Indian parliament. It was the same case with most of the legislatures at the state level. Though the WRB which is presently waiting for its approval in Loksabha facilitating positive discrimination by providing 33percent of reservation of seats at the national and state legislatures. But the promise remained unperceived since past 25yers in Indian Democracy. This paper looks at the issues that are obstructing bill with reference to caste and religious identities of women.

Keywords: Gender Identity, Critical Mass, Women Reservation Bill, Positive discrimination.

The institution of democracy stands upon the values of liberty, equality and fraternity. The principle of Universal Adult Franchise has been created to give representation and voice to all the marginal sections of the society. women being the marginalized social group need a proper representation to bargain their rights. The righteous representation of women in the legislative assembly marks the prosperous nation development. Denying the half of the humanity from their rightful place has become norm in the political arena of India. Though the constitution promises women equal status along with men as per the law but many patriarchal tendencies entrenched in political environment are obstructing women to attain the guaranteed promises of the constitution. It is often noticed that the suitable representation of women in Legislature remain a distant dream, excluding their representation in the local self- government institutions, since independence, the position of women in politics has always been marginal in India (Brar, Manpreet Kaur,2013:47).

Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. Women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation women's perspective at all levels of decision- making, the goals of equality,

development and peace cannot be achieved. The platform embodies two strategic objectives: (i) Ensuring women's equal access to and full participation in power structure and decision-making; and (ii) Increasing women's capacity to participate in decision making and leadership. Women's presence in policy-making bodies will at least make a mark in male-dominated patriarchal politico-cultural structures. The absence of women from decision-making bodies has always remained an important issue on national agenda. Their representation in national and state legislative bodies and their presence at decision-making levels is marginal.

The common tendency of all the political systems of the world is the low levels of women representation. The field of politics encouraged the monopoly of men for many centuries. Though we can notice a significant change in this situation since past few decades, but still the levels of representation is not adequate to articulate the political aspirations of women. Many countries taken discriminative positive actions to increase the women's representation. Providing political quotas for women is one of the popular step followed by many post colonial countries. The idea of compensatory justice or preferential treatment, through a series of actions by the state, has given impetus to movements for people's rights and the demand for proportionate representation in decision making structures. In 1990's the demand for Indian Women's political representation in legislative bodies has been raised with renewed vigor, not only by the women's movement but also by elected women representatives across all party lines. The arguments in defense of political reservations are tied to an understanding of the historical, legacy of women's oppression and disadvantage, the nature of gender inequalities, male dominant political institutions and gender insensitivity in the system of governance.

The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of women's economic, social and political status is essential for the achievement of both transparent and accountable government and administration and sustainable development in all areas of life. Direct and active participation of women in the field of politics definitely leaves an impression (Promilla Kapur, 2001). Introduction of reserved quota of seats for women at panchayats and municipal councils in 1993 resulted in the increasing levels of representation of women. Many studies proved that initial skepticism regarding quality and independence of the women representatives is just a myth. It is also evident from the many studies that increased number of women leaders resulted in the decreasing levels of corruption. And women villagers find it easier to approach women than men representatives and women representatives inclined to take decisions which promote welfare of women (Vicky Randall, 2006).

India ranks a miserable 134 and of 186 countries surveyed by the Inter Parliamentary Union. In the 1970s the Government of India appointed a committee to study the status of women entitled "National Committee on the Status of Women". In its report entitled 'Towards Equality', the committee recommended quota for women. However their recommendation was applicable at panchayat level. After a decade a National perspective plan for women issues by the Government in 1988, recommended 30percent quota at all levels. By late 1990s many political parties demanded representation of women in political bodies (Sree Kumar, 2006).

As response to the demands by women's organizations and political parties, for the first time in 1996, Women Reservation Bill was introduced in the parliament through 81st constitutional amendment. This bill proposed 33percent of seats in Loksabha and state legislatures. Then the Bill was referred to a joint select committee. As so much of opposition has emerged the government

has taken a step back. It was reintroduced by the next BJP government in 1998 as 84th amendment bill. Some members from Samajwadi and RJD parties obstructed it heavily. The government again attempted to enter it in to house in the end of 1998 again. But nothing was achieved (Neera Desai, 2001). In 2011 a major achievement achieved by the Bill was it got the ratification of the Rajyasabha as 108th constitutional amendment.

The above scenario makes it clear that the future of the Bill is uncertain. The Bill is facing huge opposition in its existing form. The question of quota within the quota on the lines of caste has been one of the debates by many political parties and some of the civil society groups. They favor the argument to avoid the 'elite women' domination in the political scenario. Ela Bhatt of SEWA feels that reservations will not serve any purpose but it is the economic power that makes difference. Madhu Kishwar of *Manushi*, with others suggested an alternative bill. This alternative bill suggests that political parties allot a mandatory quota of seats to women candidates. But many political parties are not agreeing to it. So the Bill was entangling in the male dominated politics, and the intricacies of caste, class, religion and party politics making the existence if the Bill more critical. Many of the Dalit and Muslim organizations are opposing the bill as there is no provision for reservations for SC,ST,OBC and Muslim women which will lead to the dominance of upper caste women in politics.

Although there are many supporters for the quota within quota which means, sub-reservation for STs, SCs, OBCs and minority communities within the 33 percent quota and the report examining the 1996 Women's Reservation Bill recommended that reservation be provided for women of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) once the Constitution was amended to allow for reservation for OBCs, the Bill in its present form doesn't favour this view – because of lack of political consensus around this issue. It was also recommended that reservation be extended to the Rajya Sabha and the Legislative Councils, but even this recommendation has not been incorporated in the Bill.

The proponents of the policy of reservation state that although equality of the sexes is enshrined in the Constitution, it is not the reality. Therefore, vigorous positive action is required to improve the condition of women. Also, there is evidence that political reservation has increased redistribution of resources in favour of the groups which benefit from reservation. A study¹ about the effect of reservation for women in panchayats shows that women elected under the reservation policy invest more in the public goods closely linked to women's concerns. A 2008 study, commissioned by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, reveals that a sizeable proportion of women representatives perceive an enhancement in their self-esteem, confidence and decision-making ability.

The WRB in the present form is facing obstacles to get approval in the Parliament for many reasons. Many times the Bill in the present form was severely criticised by many feminists and women's organisations. Caste and religious identities of women are under covering the large scoped gender identity. The bill in the present form has failed to incorporate gender quotas for OBC women and Minority Women. This type of gender quota has failed to give proportional gender quotas to different sections of women. So the undermining of a woman's caste and religious identities and treating whole women of the society as a whole created a havoc over the bill. The bill has failed in realising that women are also part of the political system where their attributions and status in the society not only depends on their gender identity but also defined by

their caste, Religion, Ethnic, regional and other identities. Though the bill has mentioned that the SC and ST women will get their proportional share of quota as per the rule of reservation in the country but it has not taken in to consideration about the OBC and minority women groups interest.

This provision of the bill neglected interest of several women groups but also may result in the domination of elite women or political heirs of the standing leaders may contest on behalf their brother, father, husband or any other male member of the family so that they can protect their family seat in the game rotation of 1/3rd of seats every time. Even the provision of rotation of seats has also created a lot of confusion and one of the most debated issues in the WRB. Because this provision in the Bill may create political unemployment and the standing leaders may lose their position in their constituency. The caste and religious demarcations in the rotation of the was also lacking. So many of the provisions in the WRB in present form created more confusion and chaos rather hope. All the time when the Bill was introduced in the history of parliament it is just an outcome activity of vote bank politics. Many times, women are considered as vote bank. To bring the bill in to force needs the commitment among the minds of the leaders.

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