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BREAKING BARRIERS: STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY BY ENSURING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION.

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Abstract

Political participation is the cornerstone of any democracy. However, many democracies worldwide are struggling with a lack of women's participation in politics, largely due to patriarchal social norms. This issue has serious implications for a country's development and political culture. Without women legislators and administrators in decision-making bodies, policies may not be analyzed from a female perspective, leading to non-inclusive legislation. In order to achieve the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, India must prioritize the political participation of women. By doing so, India can truly achieve the essence of democracy, which is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Therefore, this paper highlights the urgent need to address the issue of women's political participation in India.

Keywords

Political participation, democracy, social norms, patriarchy.

Introduction

“YATRA NAARYASTHU PUJYANTHE RAMANTHU THATHRA DEVATHA”

“Pithah Rakshathi kaumaare, Bharthh Rakshathi Youvane, Puthro
Rakshathi Vaardhaky Na Sthree Swathanthryam Arhathi”

-MANUSMRITI (CHAPTER 9(3))

These are two paradoxical verses from Manusmriti, an ancient legal code that existed in India. The first verse states that gods exist, where women are worshipped, but the second verse states that women do not deserve freedom and must constantly be protected by their fathers, husbands, and sons. These verses summarize the existence of women in India, wherein, on one hand, they are respected, but on the other hand, they are denied their basic rights. The same applies in the realm of political participation. It is a well-established fact that political participation is one of the foundations upon which democracy rests. It can be defined as the voluntary activities undertaken by the mass public to influence public policy, either directly or by affecting the selection of persons who make policies (Uhlener, C. J. ,2015). Since its Independence, India has made efforts to achieve better inclusivity of women in multiple spheres. Through its fundamental rights, the constitution has safeguarded women's honor and rights through articles 14-18. However, on closer analysis, we can find that India has been practising a form of aversion towards female participation in politics. Politics is always perceived as a male domain that has restricted women from participating in various aspects of the political process like elections, legislature, etc. Around the nation, we can find news about women candidates being denied seats to .

participate in elections. The last in the row was the case of Lathika Subhash, an ex-Mahila congress chief from Kerala, who shaved her head as a protest against not granting a ticket to the Kerala Legislative assembly. The fact that India was ranked 160th for representation of women in ministerial positions (IPU and UN Women, 2021) and other executive bodies reveals the extent of the low political participation of women. There are psychological, socio-cultural, and economic reasons for the same. The Indian social system has always associated femininity with qualities like calmness, care, motherhood, and submissiveness, which are perceived as negative attributes of politics. However, India has also witnessed dynamic movements like Chipko and the Anti-arrack movement, which had a serious social impact. These incidents reveal that women are competitive and socially oriented, and can efficiently take part in politics and shape and share power.

Even in the 21st century, when women occupy 50% of the population, there are only 102 M.P.s in Lok Sabha, which has 545 members, is not at all representative. Efforts like 33% reservation for women in Lok Sabha were not passed and continue to be a dream. When India, as a nation, is at a juncture towards becoming a world power, it cannot deny women's voices. And we must remember that politics ceases to be politics if it fails to inculcate the voices of the voiceless. Overall, it can be stated that women's Political participation must be understood at the confluence of social, economic, and political reality to gain a better understanding of the problem and the factors that contribute to this issue. This article tries to understand the reasons that hinder women's active political participation and its effect on democracy and suggests measures to strengthen the level of participation and democracy in general.

Understanding the Barriers

India and the low level of women's political participation must be understood from different dimensions. There are socio-cultural, political, and economic realities that need to be addressed while understanding the problem of the lack of women's political participation. However, these factors are interconnected and predominantly influenced by the patriarchal nature of Indian society.

1.1 Socio-Cultural Factors

Most of the South Asian countries are patriarchal in nature and this has an influence on the social and political participation of women. India is not an exception to this. The strong cultural norms and gendered restrictions prevent women from actively engaging in the political sphere. India's social reality is rooted in the belief that women are incapable of holding political power because their natural traits are not oriented towards the traits of a strong leader. Ameen Nisha & Vezhaventhan (2018) analyzed the level of political participation of women in India and other nations to understand the reasons for the low level of their political participation. The study found that India lags behind other nations in political participation due to its socio-cultural, religious, and political causes. India was ranked 148 for representation of women in government and other executive bodies. Despite the increase in the number of female M.P.s, the number is still below the global average of 24.5% (as per 2019 data)[1]. Similar studies on the theme of women's political participation have found other reasons that prove, how gendered norms prevent women's political participation. A recent study conducted by the Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR) and National Election Watch (NEW) found that less than a tenth of more

than 50,000 contesting in national and state elections are women[2]. Singh, A and Choudhary, S. (2021) in their study titled 'Women Participation in Indian Politics: Struggle for Visibility' focused on the various barriers in the path of women's political participation. The research states multiple reasons that hinder women's participation in politics like male preponderance, lack of financial resources, abusive treatment faced by female party members, and constricted social perceptions about female leadership. The social expectations about women and their roles have become serious barriers that prevent women from actively participating in politics. The political environment is not that favorable for women as they face gendered biases, sexism, and social media attacks during their political course. A shocking aspect of socio-cultural norms is that both men and women subscribe to the gendered norms and believe that politics shouldn't be a domain for females. (Vissandjée et al., 2006) in their study 'Women's Political Participation in Rural India states that both males and females had similar perceptions about women's political participation and considered politics to be a sphere inappropriate for women. Both genders believed that women lacked certain faculties required for politics. These included communication skills, leadership skills, and basic reading and writing skills. Even when older women are elected as sarpanch, their age is the deciding factor. Permission was always a necessity for women to engage in any activity. Even after having employment, women found it difficult to participate in other activities as the whole responsibility of the house rested upon them. Some scholars attribute psychological barriers like fear to participate in elections and lack of public speaking skills, as reasons for women's political participation (Shvedova, 2002). However, this

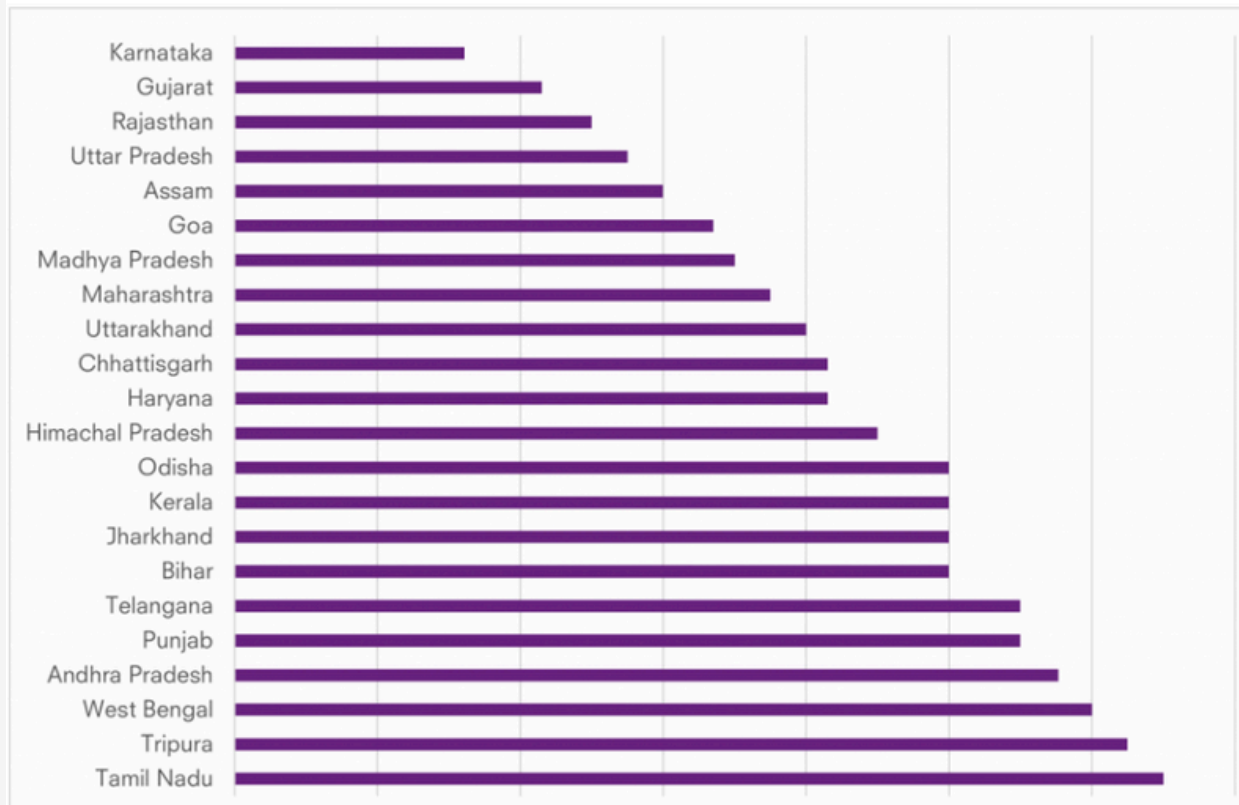
must be read together with the social conditioning and gendered socialization that women in India have been receiving over the centuries. Hence, we can say that Indian women are constrained by the age-old patriarchal norms that are strongly intertwined with culture and religion.

1.2 Lack of Inclusivity at decision-making bodies- Political constraints

Since its Independence, India has tried to ensure women's political participation in decision-making bodies. The 73rd amendment of the Indian constitution led to the legalization of the Panchayati Raj system to ensure democratization from the grass-root level. Article 243D of the constitution mandates that 1/3rd of the total seats in Panchayat must be reserved for women. The policy aimed at increasing women's political participation at the local level. Studies have shown that the legislation was proved to be successful in increasing women's political participation at the local level. (O'Connell, S.D, 2020) found that this mandate for reservation significantly contributed to the increase in the number of female candidates who contested in national and state elections since the mid-1990s. However, women's representation in important offices remains low. . Female representation in state governments lags significantly behind and thus excluding them from seats of institutional power (Gulati, N., & Spencer, E. 2021). Currently, West Bengal is the only state with a woman Chief Minister. As per the data collected by IGC about state government leadership, Six Indian states don't have female ministers. None of the states even have 1/3rd of female ministers in their governments. The highest proportion is for Tamil Nadu having 13% (Gulati, N., & Spencer, E. 2021). 68% of states

have less than 10% of women representation in leadership roles. Since Independence, the level of women being elected to Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha are very low. The average number of female Rajya Sabha members is 9.5%^[3]. Multiple reasons can be attributed to the same. (Khanna, 2009) in her article ‘Political Participation of Women’ in India states that women remain at the periphery of political power due to cultural constraints and due to lack of political consciousness. Gate Keepers within political parties are reluctant to give seats to women candidates, and those independent candidates seem to be in a weak position regarding their chance of victory. Hence, it can be stated that women face political barriers in competing in elections and these barriers are rooted in the gendered perceptions of their male counterparts.

Figure 1. Proportion of female ministers in state governments



(Source: <https://www.theigc.org/blog/leaders-and-citizens-womens-political-participation-in-india/>)

1.3 Violence Against Women

Violence against women is a general and specific issue with varying implications. It is a pervasive issue with severe implications for both individuals and society as a whole. In India, this issue is particularly prevalent, with women experiencing various forms of violence at alarming rates. This violence takes many forms, including domestic violence, sexual assault, honor killings, and female infanticide. Additionally, violence against women is also found in the political sphere, where women are often subjected to physical and verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and other forms of discrimination. This not only creates a hostile work environment for women in politics but also discourages women from entering the political arena altogether. (Nussbaum, 2011) (cited in Opoku, 2020) states that 24% of men in India committed sexual violence against women at some point in their life. Sexual crimes against women have increased by 70% within two decades. In 2018, India was ranked as the most dangerous country for women to live[4].

The issue is equally prevalent in the political realm of India. Women politicians in India have been subjected to physical, mental, and emotional abuse. A study by the Centre for Social Research titled *Violence Against Women in Politics* revealed that the incidence of physical and verbal abuse is higher in India than in Pakistan. In the survey conducted across India, Nepal, and Pakistan, 45% of respondents (women politicians) from India reported having faced physical abuse. (Henderson, 2018)(cited in Opoku, 2020) states that women political leaders face psychological and physical violence, which forces them to abandon politics and withdraw their candidatures. (Godin. M, 2021) As per the report by Amnesty

International, women politicians, on average, receive 113 problematic tweets of verbal violence. The report analyzed 1,14,716 tweets to 95 female Indian politicians and found that 1 out of 7 tweets were abusive in nature[5]. This abuse is severe in the case of Muslim women politicians as 55% of the online abuses were directed against Muslim women politicians. This reveals the extent of violence that women politicians have to face.

Overall, it can be stated that women in India face multiple barriers with regard to political participation and there must be efficient policies to ensure that female participation and representation is ensured at all levels. Such factors have raised questions about the values of equality and justice and also about the idea of democracy upheld by the constitution. This is a serious issue that can hamper the democratic values of the nation and could also lead to its erosion.

Making way for Women

Studies point out that women face psychological barriers with regard to political participation. This has roots in the social conditioning that they have received. So, the first step towards achieving higher participation would be to equip the present generation of women with confidence and skills which are considered to be necessary for politics. Similar policies were adopted by nations like Rwanda where women candidates were given leadership training and such initiatives helped Rwanda achieve more than 50% of women's representation in their government ("Revisiting Rwanda Five Years After Record-breaking Parliamentary Elections," 2018). Government can provide similar training at village levels through self-help groups that ensure the psychological empowerment of women. Training can be provided for public speaking, team building, and building self-confidence. As per the Global Gender Gap Index 2022, India ranks 107th out of 153

countries in terms of Educational attainment, which shows that education can play an important role in determining political participation. Government must continue and strengthen its existing policies and must devise new measures to increase the enrolment of girl children in schools. Government must promote equivalency schools wherein women who couldn't complete their education, can attain education at any point in their lives.

After implementing such policies, there must be a political consensus in passing The Women's Reservation Bill or The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill to better represent women in Parliament, as this would ensure that women have a voice in influencing the legislative process. Such a reform would also motivate millions of women in India to be actively involved in politics and create their space. It can be clearly understood that low level of political participation has its root in the patriarchal norms and social norms that consider politics as a male domain. Here, schools have a better role in creating awareness that politics is a level playing field. Such efforts in creating a social discourse about the need for increased political participation of women can reap benefits in the long run. Inaccessibility within political party is another major issue. In India, political parties are the primary means through which parliamentary and state legislative elections are contested and triumphed, making them the fundamental political apparatus (Ghosh, 2022). Despite political parties in India making promises in their constitutions to ensure adequate representation for women, records from elections reveal that they offer very few party tickets to female candidates in reality (Rai & Spary, 2019). Hence, the idea of an open space for participation in election remains bleak for women. However, studies suggest how women legislators can perform better in terms of economic indicators in their constituencies compared to their male counterparts (Ghosh, 2022), which shows why there must a be legal

interventions to make reservations for women necessary for the parliamentary elections as this can open wider opportunities for women to contest in elections.

India and its young generation of women are not free from social narratives based on patriarchal norms. Thus, the priority would be to promote positive leadership cultures in schools across India as schools have a more significant psychological impact on children. This can be facilitated by mandating student councils across all schools and promoting girl children in influential leadership positions, as this would provide an avenue for them to overcome their inhibitions and fears. The government must focus on making schools the centre for creating future leaders and for rewriting the social narratives about women. Such informed and focused policies would ensure that India is able to achieve higher levels of women's participation and representation in the future.

Conclusion

The future of any nation depends on how its female population is treated. India, when embarking on its journey as a superpower, needs to ensure that women also get equal representation in spearheading our nation and its future. Democracy is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Any initiatives towards correcting democracy must start from the issue of women's political participation as this would be the stepping stone towards other changes as well. Significant studies show that increased women's participation can ensure better development (Dang, 2022) and would ensure that policies legislated and implemented are designed in such a way that it takes in the concerns of women.

Changing times requires changing perspectives. India must reconsider its priorities and give increased importance to the issue of women's participation. More discourses about women's participation must be encouraged in India. Such moves can surely aid India's economic and social goals in a transitional phase. This would also ensure that India is a democracy of all and not a few.

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