

# Study material for M.A.II Semester Political Science

## Gender and Politics in India

### Introduction

A sound human mind desires a 'flat world' based on 'merit' 'virtue' and 'deed', but, unfortunately, human life and social structures have made living lifeworlds 'unequal'; intersectioning through caste, class, culture, and, more harshly through gender. The real world is not perfect; rather full of biases. The constitutional equality does not provide allowances for the inequalities and biases pertaining to each society and imperfect nature of the real world. It is imperative to understand role of state in correcting these inequalities through positive discrimination.

### **State, Affirmative Discrimination and the Articulation of WRB**

The state i.e. 'individual writ large' works as a manager responding to

all articulated demands. The challenge in front of state becomes more haunting whilst responding on two essentially contested concepts—equality and social justice. On the one hand, the constitutional ideal of 'equality' emphasises to treat everyone equally before the law irrespective of religion, caste, creed, race, and gender, on the other hand, rising demand for 'social justice' at the cost of the same commitment for equality before the law; all are mobilizing deeply in facet of globalization. The voices for social justice are more vocally raised by 'demos' who are unable to get dignified human life in the 'normal course of mobilizations' in democracy. The demand for social justice in form of 'positive discrimination' is not new in India. The constitution makers have responded earlier favorably for positive discrimination accepting demands from large numbers of people who had experienced social discrimination through centuries on account of its peculiar institution called the caste system

Turing to gender, women represent almost half of the population of every country in the world, but, on average, their representation in parliaments is only 16%. The percentage varies from nation to nation; from zero in Saudi Arabia to 56.3% in Rwanda in 2010. In India, the largest democracy in the world, the percentage is only 11.23, first time crossing the single digit mark in the history of its parliament. Can one consider India a democracy for women? Democracy is based on 'equal representation' and 'participation', but women, are under-represented. Their underrepresentation in parliament is considered as a 'democratic deficit' symbolizing unequal power relations between public/private dichotomous spheres of the archaic patriarchal structure.

Looking into the past, one can find that women were an “issue” for Indian social reform movement as social evils were enshrined with women. This was identified by the ‘civilized British colonizers’ also. After sometime, women were expected to fight for greater cause of Indian Independence rather than looking for women’s right. Even Mahatma Gandhi, who during the years of civil obedience and freedom struggles said, ‘I want women to take their proper place by the side of men. The timing is wrong. Indians need to struggle against the British; this franchise campaign will waste your energy. Women should use their energies helping their men against their common foe; liberate yourself and the men folk from the death-grip of the existing government which is the greatest of all social evils with which society is cursed.’”

To follow Gandhiji, women had actively participated in national movement and proved as an important source of strength. This movement has led women recognize her ability to decision making, courage and, more importantly equality. It was not at all contemplation that women will return to their previous silent and secondary status in free India. It was assumed that women would take up their rightful place beside men as partners in free India. Many women withdrew into their homes, secure in the belief that they had ushered in a democratic republic in which the dreams and aspirations of the mass of people would be achieved.

Even after independence, it took many years for the demand for women’s rights to crystallize. It actually happened under external and internal pressures. In the early 1960s the United Nations had asked the member

nations to “prepare reports on women’s status.” India procrastinated for years. It responded only in the early 1970s, when the UN decided to observe 1975 as the International Year of Women. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi nominated the veteran freedom fighter Phulrenu Guha from West Bengal to prepare a report on the Status of Women in India. The report, *Toward Equality*, which ran into 480 pages and is frequently termed as the “founding text” in feminist circles was tabled in parliament in 1975.

However, its recommendations were not for positive discrimination in favor of women but acknowledged that women’s political rights create an illusion of equality and power in India for which the state should be active.

Internally, women’s organization campaigned against rape, domestic violence unnoticeable labor and women’s contribution to a male society. ‘It was in the ‘second wave’ that women’s socio–economic position, which was the previous focus of women’s movement, made the first systematic shift to the principles of political representation’. Gradually, there were mobilizations for women’s grassroots level decision making power by women’s organization. The report of CSWI advice for women at grass root level should be granted greater opportunity to enter into decision making process forums, through the facility of reserved seats. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments put a 33% reservation in place for women at this level and ushered over one million women into politics for the first time.

In this way, external pressure and internal pressures with growing success story of grassroots level reservation asked for articulation for same

reservation in national and state assemblies. Women's Reservation Bill (WRB), demanding a minimum quota of a 33% representation of women in parliament and state legislature, as a testament to more equitable and inclusive system of governance in India is articulated to share power in Indian democracy.

### **The Argumentative Journey of Bill: The Politics of 'Power Sharing' in India**

The women's Reservation Bill, a testament to the recognition of women as a political collective that requires fair representation through quota, has had a tumultuous life span and still floats around the corridors of Parliament, patiently awaiting definite action. It was introduced as the Constitution Amendment (81<sup>st</sup>) Bill on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1996 by the United Front government, in keeping with its Common Minimum Program. The bill proposes to reserve one-third of seats in the House of the People and the State Assembly for women. It demands the amendment of Articles 330 and 332 of the Indian Constitution, a sub - reservation for one third of seats reserved for women in Scheduled Castes (SC) and Schedule Tribe (ST), and required a rotation of seats that are to be reserved. Seats to be reserved in rotation will be determined by draw of lots in such a way that a seat shall be reserved only once in three consecutive general elections.

The bill faced controversies within its 24 hours in the Lok Sabha. The effort is to completely understand the arguments surrounded over WRB which cause the deadlock and delay in parliament. The issue is complex; if it would be easy in black and white, it supposes to become an act back in time. The

first controversy is heated around positive discrimination per se as opponents view it as inequality in itself. They generally are unaware of the fact how society is unequal for women. There is difference between political equality guaranteed by constitution and social and economic inequalities in which women live their life. "However, even some of those who were initially against the WRB have begun to realize that, even as a last resort, it is the only method which will allow women a fair access to power". Overall, there is consensus; positive actions are necessary to create opportunities for women. The real contentious fight is regarding exact provisions and proposed amendments. The idea that the constituency which is reserved for women should be rotated has been criticized as illogical and unproductive both politically and practically. From a political point of view, minister will get less chance to nurture constituencies; they will not get support and long-lasting reputation from public. Practically, it will decrease continuation of policy and strategy. However, this is beneficial as MPs will be careful to work well within short span of time and any ridiculous policy will not be faced by public for long run. It will work as a corrective measure.

The major disagreement is regarding sub-quota within quota argument. "Whilst the sub-quota for Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribes is already provided within the WRB, some parties and individuals have raised concerns for a sub-quota for women from Other Backward Classes (OBC) and from Muslim communities". Arguing that women are not homogenous category; they are divided through caste and class. A homogenous reservation will benefit to elite Hindu women only, therefore, against that, the opposition asks

for vertical reservation mainly quota for women from backward communities (OBC) and minorities (Muslim).

However, 'supporters of the bill contend that the Women's Reservation Bill should identify women in a 'horizontal' manner, cutting across the other vertical segregation such as caste, class and religion' (Shri Nitesh Kumar: 1996). Indeed, there have been some women who came forward claiming to represent the voice of mainstream Muslim women and made it clear that they do not want a separate quota. They want women in general to be given 33% reservation (1998). It will be politically sensitive issue to provide reservation on OBCs and religious grounds in Indian democracy and will open a new debate and problem about political reservation in India. Actually, those parties who are asking for reservation for minority and backward classes, they have not actually showed up any welfare for them. These all are tactics to not to share power. This debate has become an effective stalling method.

To resolve the issue alternatives are put forward. "One alternative proposed is that the political parties themselves take a voluntary, or mandatory, quota of women as candidates at each election. In this way, more women will receive party backing, helping them both financially and increasing their visibility as candidates. This is the idea behind the 'Alternative Bill', which would require parties to nominate 33% of its candidates as women by amending the Representation of the People.

The proposal does not seem to be effective as it is based on monopoly of political parties. Will political parties give ticket to women from winning

constituencies or will field them from one that are likely to be lost. There is no assurance of women's representation due to patriarchal social conditioning which belittles women always. Political parties are the products of the same conditioning. The issue of women's proper reservation needs some strong and permanent step like WRB. By reserving seats only for women, woman can be chosen over another woman. Therefore, the competition will be based on politics and policies, and not as a gender fight.

Further, the feeling that women should not win on the cost of men has given another alternative that is 'dual member' (one men and one women) electorates in 180 constituencies. While analyzing this alternative, one can find that the 180 double member constituencies would generate women only a 24% of reservation whereas the demand is for 33%. The alternative not at all provides equality as demanded in WRB which in itself is a compromise as the demand is not for 50 % reservation.

The second problem with double-member constituencies is that only one-third of MPs are elected from these constituencies. This creates an inequality between MPs; those that independently represent their district and those that share this responsibility with another MP- the double member constituency. The proposal of double member constituencies will most likely fail to place significant political decision-making powers in the hands of women, as the men that they share them with will be experienced politicians who are reluctant to allow their women partners independence and equal decision-making powers. This denies women the right to independently represent an electorate. Further to this, it also adds to the negative



impressions of women as *abalas*, unable to stand alone and incapable of performing the function of an MP in their own right.

The burden on State resources would be heightened up through this alternative. Against that, the WRB is a better option for ensuring women's representation in Indian democracy.

Opponents are not basically against women's reservation; rather they do not want to share power. Some of them are actually against women's empowerment. They are those people who consider women an object, yet they don't like to be considered anti-feminist. The increase in women's number in parliament will decrease the number of men the body. This will be like political suicide for them; demoralizing for men who have nurtured constituencies for long years. No one has surrendered power in history why shall one think that politician in our times will surrender theirs. They are no Gandhians who will sacrifice their small interest for a big vision of democratic governance and empowerment of women.

## **Global Lessons and Future Strategy**

Why are women startling absence in politics? What measure can be taken to ensure women's political participation? Although democracy has power to include women, yet, the social setting, upon which the democracy functions, is responsible for the low level of participation. The need is to directly challenge the social structure to make positive\_changes. NGOs, women's organization, both national and international institutions, even governments have made significant efforts to correct gender imbalance in

politics. Beijing conference on women and CEADAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) has greatly influenced women's participation. Apart that, various international conferences have agreed upon the need for at least 30% representation of women in decision making positions.

The most significant method to ensure women's political participation is the system of political quota. 77 countries (with constitutional, electoral or political parties' quota) have adopted it as a method of compensating for the discriminatory barriers to politics faced by certain categories of people. However, whilst some countries have progressed substantially, much remains to be done to bridge the gap between women and politics. By 2010, only 11 countries have reached the benchmark. These are Rwanda (56%), followed by Sweden (47%), South Africa (45%), Iceland (43%), Argentina (42), The Netherlands (41%), Norway and Senegal (40%), Denmark (38%) and Angola and Costa Rica (37%). All these countries have used quotas, apart from Denmark and Senegal, as at least one method of increasing women's representation.

Apart from quotas, what is needed is to integrate gender perspective into public policy making, implementation and planning. The neutral policies are not serving into account women's concerns and needs. The idea is to enhance gender budget also to increase government expenditure in social services giving priority to "care" economy which emphasizes on education, health, family and community services.

## Conclusion

There has been acute discrimination on grounds of 'gender' in patriarchal India. What we need now is democratic India which can assure compensatory justice to women. If discrimination has been on the ground of sex/gender, positive discrimination should also be on the same grounds. It may not be a democratic process but it can bring democratic outcome. Of course, WRB is not a blunt instrument; but nothing better can assure women's political representation. The latest development is that the bill has passed through the Rajya Shabha. One can be hopeful for the future, but, the remaining journey is long to be travelled by WRB. In reality, at the root of democratic success is social engineering which is affected through political bargaining.