

Women's Rights and Movements in Political Sphere: Issues and Debates in India

Silan Das

Lecturer in Christ College (Dept. of Sociology)

Rajesh Barik

Ph.d Scholar IIT Indore.

ABSTRACT

A woman constitutes more than half of the human race and plays a crucial role in all spheres of life. The reality check of growth of any nation lies not only in its economic growth, but crucially in the status of its women. Gender consider as a Sociological or Cultural term and it has been a key issue in the history of the nation since the beginning of British colonial rule over India. Gender, and the term “women” has been used to both front and confront issues of equality in the society. The colonial rulers used gender, and what they considered as brutal and barbaric patriarchal practices towards women, as a justification for the rule forced on India.

INTRODUCTION

The gender issue has been the basis of women's movements in India mobilizing against violence and discrimination, and for improved living conditions and their human rights, amongst others. It is well known that the possibility for all citizens to participate in the management of public affairs is at the very heart of democracy. A basic precondition for women's participation in politics was recognition of her 'right to vote'. The term “amongst others” can actually highlight the challenges and the contestations the women's movements have faced, and still “is deeply cleaved” by (Sen, 2002: 461). The women's movements have, throughout the whole period of colonial and post colonial rule, not been faced one movement, but several movements. The movements have been contested for representing “women” as a cultural and politically uniform group, simply because women's challenges are not uniform, and depend more on caste, religion, poverty and other social factors like education, rather than their sex.

The Indian women's movement

Despite women not being a uniform group, the term women's movement when describing and analyzing gender issues. This is justified by the need to categorize groups in order to be able to analyze structures and developing trends in the society. The primary identity for both male and female Indians is their citizenship that per definition entails the promise of equality within a democratic state. This, however, has been challenged by the patriarchal traditions and the religious and cast structures that have defined women as subordinate to men, and belonging to the family sphere in the setting of a community. The early seeds for raising the issue of gender in India came with the colonial rule where the British rule embarked on a “civilizing mission” on a society viewed as barbaric in its treatment of women. Women's status was considered especially low whilst men was considered as exceptionally violent towards women. (Sen 2002: 465). Through English education Indian men from the upper casts was exposed to a “modern” view on women's rights. From this educated elite the Social Reform Movement emerged to address the wrongdoings of the patriarchal order. The movement achieved changing some of the easily observable atrocities practiced against women like abolishing sati and providing widows the right to remarry, but the focus was more on changing the negative elements of the old traditions rather than introducing rights equal to that of men. The abolishment of sati has been highlighted as an important achievement, which undeniable is right, but the frequency was limited even before abolishment; documented cases of sati from 1813 to 1828. Considering

the practice did not end with the abolishment; the last well documented case known happened in 1987 (Sen, 2002), other cases have been reported as late as 2008 (The Times of India (web), 2008) the achievement is more symbolic than actually having a real impact on the situation for women. It can also be argued on to what extent the new rights had an impact outside the new emerging elite. In the new movement focusing on gender issues men was still women's protector, not their peer. The gender movement was on men's terms and with men as leaders of the movement. A small group of women benefitted by the colonial modernization of the society through education, employment leadership and political participation, but the privileges were often disbursed through the fathers or husbands, and only to women in the upper casts (Sen 2002). Conservative Indian opinion was more resistant to the colonial intervention into the traditional and personal sphere and challenged the ideas of the new liberal elite. The debate between the traditionalists and the modernists used gender as the field, but the real battle was on Indian tradition and identity, and did not, again, focus on women rights. Women became symbols in the fight between the new and the traditional view on the society. In the prolongation of this debate the nationalistic movement adopted the colonial view of the domestic realm, meaning the family, the home and its women, as the sphere where India's identity was to be found. The nationalist resisted to subordinate to the "civilizing" efforts of colonial modernity. Hence, women were not only the field on which battles between modernists and traditionalists were fought; they were also the arena for conflicts and agreements between the colonial rulers and the colonized middle class (Sen 2002). The subordinate position of women vs. men was not changed in this process, but it was transformed into being more institutionalized when the interest of colonial state and the nationalists converged in their need and desire for control and power. The colonial state sought control and stability over labor arrangements that were based on the household to secure the revenue; the nationalist men of the upper casts desired control over the domestic sphere and the women belonging to it. The marriage system was the key to this control and stability, and men were the undisputed leaders in this system. Through the social reform, the elitist high-cast men were empowered by the colonial rule to transform the Hindu view on marriage to an irrevocable sacrament with disastrous effect on the low-caste women. Hindu law now prohibited divorce despite that this previously had been allowed in all but the very high castes (Sen 2002). On this backdrop associations for women emerged early in the 20th century, still initiated by men. Clubs, groups and associations provided training grounds and access to education for women, but did still also impose traditional gender roles and values. When women tried to define their own values and questioned the traditional view on gender the shortcomings of these associations became clear. Three important national women's movements emerged from these local associations; Women's Indian Association (WIA) (1917), the National Council of Indian Women (NCIW) (1925) and the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC) (1927). The two first, WIA and NCIW, were not successful in their efforts and claim for representing all Indian women. They were both elitist organizations with limited class and caste representation and had also limited geographical impact, but they still played a significant role due to their contacts through family relations and social interaction within the upper classes and casts. The latter of the organizations, however, had more success in representing women nationwide through its alliance with the Indian National Congress. The campaign for the Child Marriage Bill strengthened, consolidated and brought consensus to the women's movement. Women were increasingly being involved in politics, but primarily as tokens with little real influence (Sen 2002).

Female participation in political activities took on two shapes that continued towards, through and beyond independence. One being a small group of women who were able to gain public leadership on equal terms as men, the second, and including most women, was restricted to the traditional "feminine" sphere of politics. Gandhi drew on religious traditions and iconized women in the image of Sita, Savitri and Damayantiresonating well with Hindu women. The Muslim society and Muslim women, however, responded negative to Hindu view on women. In line with the traditional Hindu view of women, Gandhi argued that women should take their place beside men and focus their energy on fighting their common foe, being the

colonial rulers. The Hindu-middle-class ideology of the women's movements soon divided the movement, not only by the fault lines of religion, but also in terms of class and caste. By the mid 1940-ies the women's movement began to diversify politically as well as by caste and religious differences. The focus after the independence became even more diversified when education for women was expanding and the women's organizations turned the attention more to issues of welfare rather than the overarching issues of equality and the human rights for women. After the liberation economic growth became more important, as it was perceived that women would benefit more from the new nation-state as the economic situation improved. This shifted the focus to struggles between the classes, demands for wages, whilst the focus on the relation and power balance between the genders, domestic violence and the demand for real political influence for women was ignored. Sen states that "There was no women's platform in which such issues could be articulated, mobilized, or fought." (Sen 2002: 480). Throughout the period after independence the dominating position in women's movements was a view on the state and the system, not men as the enemy, and claims for equality was based within the framework of the traditional view on gender and women's roles. The prevailing view was that development, industrialization and economic growth would deliver the results as they had been seen elsewhere in the developed world; all would be beneficiaries of development, women included. A report from the Committee on the Status of Women in India released in 1974 showed that not only had the conditions for women in India not improved, for many women, especially the poor, the conditions had worsened. Gender differences had become greater in political participation, education, health and employment. At the same time there was a shift visible in Indian politics, inaugurated by Indira Gandhi where the democratic base of mainstream political institutions were broadened (Sen 2002). The ground now was laid for the "New Social Movements" where women's own voices were given space. The new growth of women's organizations did not resemble the earlier structures. There were no efforts towards widespread organizations targeting all women, but rather locally and issue-oriented organizations with more focused agendas, and with women as leaders. From this downwards-up growth of popular movements, their leaders, who often had their background from the elite, were able to utilize their links with the state, now representing groups at grass-root level with a strong mobilization potential, to both achieve greater impact on legislation and to give the movement a national scope.

The Committee of the Status of Women stated in its report from 1974 that seats should be reserved for women in municipalities, and proposed that panchayats should include women to secure a minimum percentage of female participation. The Committee also suggested that all-women panchayats should be set up. This was a response to the fact that Indian women had had very little representation in institutional politics since independence. The issue of representation did not emerge from the women's movements and the debate on reservation was equally strong outside of the movement as within, but it was still welcomed warmly by several women's movements.

Women's participation in local governance, in the Panchayat Raj had already been debated in since 1957. The debate round the reservation in the Panchayat Raj has not been strong. The first solution to the demand was to include women, who were interested in working for children and other women, in the panchayats. This followed neatly the traditional patriarchal patterns of the society and posed little treat to men, and men's position. A breakthrough came in 1983 when women were granted 25% of the seats in local councils by law in Karnataka, a state in southern India. In 1993 this was adopted nationally when the Constitution Act 1992 (73rd Amendment) and The Constitution Act 1992 (74th Amendment) were passed, relating reservations for women to panchayats and municipalities. One-third of seats in all panchayats and municipalities nationwide, as well as one-third of the position of being chairpersons in the bodies, were reserved for women (Sen 2002). The reservations acts were passed without any opposition in the Parliament, and with only a minor debate. The (men in) Parliament, with the passing of the panchayati reservations, left one-third of the seats in the lowest elected bodies to women, a move that also reached and soothed the grass-root. The reservation for women in the lower elected bodies has by many been regarded as a

success. The elected women in the first round did in many cases have little or no political experience, but they did, through their commitment to the positions they have been elected to, gain both the missing experience and self confidence to question priorities and front issues of importance for them. The experiences have showed that elected female party members have been more committed to building broad alliances among themselves rather than to the party.

It is interesting to elaborate on the debate on reservations for women in Parliament in view of the smooth process concerning reservations in the lower elected bodies as well as the experiences gained from the process and the aftermath. Two tendencies have been present as a result of female reservations in the lower elected bodies. First, a new Bill has been proposed for the reservation of one-third of the seats in Parliament, and, second, the male opposition against women's inclusion in higher elected bodies has hardened. The debate this time has been much sharper, and has created new alliances and tensions, both in the women's movements and across the political lines. It has been argued that it will both secure a more democratic gender representation in Parliament, but has at the same time been regarded as highly undemocratic as "a citizen of India will be barred from contesting a particular seat on grounds of gender" (Dasgupta, 2010), referring to men being hindered to stand for election in selected districts. Representatives elected by reasons of gender are argued will not be representing the district they are elected from when they are elected solely on the ground of their gender. Dasgupta argues that women have had full rights of being elected to parliament and the State Assembly since the formation of the Constitution in 1950. Connected to this it has been raised questions on if men cannot represent women, how can women represent the male population in the districts they are elected from? And further; will women represent the uniform interest of their gender regardless of caste, class and/or religious differences? Sen addresses this notion and points to the unwillingness of political parties allow women a voice in policy making, as well as opportunities for leading positions (Sen 2002).

There has also been argued that the representation of women will be of a more symbolic nature as the female representatives is will be chosen from a narrow group of "the wives and daughters of politicians" (Sen 2002: 507) that will not be true and democratic representatives for their gender. This view is challenged by the experiences with women quotas in the lower elected bodies where the female representatives have showed that women have allied to front issues of common interest. Further it has been argued that if women are to be reserved seats, then religious groups should also be granted their reserved seats, and the gender representation should have sub-quotas for Other Backwards Casts (OBC). The arguments seen in the early women's movements and the debate of representation in elected lower and higher bodies in India has elements of equity and differences. It is as Sen argues possible to recognize similarities in the processes. In the early period of the women's movements the battles were mostly restricted to the traditional "feminine" sphere of the society. A limited section from the upper caste placed themselves, and were placed, within the religious iconized view on women, justifying their demands for involvement with their unique female biological and psychological qualities, enabling only women to transfer these qualities to the public sphere. Skills acquired in the running of the household would benefit the society if transferred. The same, but slightly nuanced arguments have reoccurred in the debate on quotations for women's representation in the lower elected bodies i.e. the municipalities and the Panchayati Raj, when women was first included as interested in working for children and other women. Their knowledge from the domestic sphere could with this be utilized in the public sphere. Common for both these processes is also that it did not threaten men's position; it was sold in as "Good for society" in Sen's words (Sen 2002: 508). In the debate regarding women's representation in elected bodies, both at lower level, but also at higher level i.e. the Parliament and the State Assembly a common argument for including women has been that women supposedly have higher moral standards than men, and is suggested to be able to rid the Parliament of corruption and that they as new parliamentarians will not be as manipulative as their male colleagues (Sen 2002). Again there is a clear parallel to be drawn to the social feminism in the women's movement with the Hindu perception of

women that was fronted by e.g. Gandhi, where women were idolized feminine figures. As seen earlier when the Hindu-middle-class ideology of the women's movements also challenged and divided women by the fault lines of religion, class and caste there is also the same divide present in the debate on representation. There is however a clear difference in the present debate on representation. Where the arguments on women's involvement earlier had a stronger element of idolization of women belonging to their feminist sphere, the present day debate has a new and strong element of empirical examples to draw from. Studies from women's inclusion in panchayats have suggested that female villagers find approaching female representatives easier than their male counterparts. As female representatives have gained experience, and have benefitted from training the government and/or non-governmental organizations have provided, their increased presence led to reduced levels of corruption.

Women's Voting History Across The World:

Women rarely participated in the establishment of their governments or the creation of judicial systems, state powers or governmental norms and policies. It started with asking for equal treatment at work places. To recall, the up springs where from a movement for women's suffrage in France in the 1780s and 1790s during the period of the French Revolution. By the 1880s, women were working internationally to win more rights. In 1888, women activists from the United States, Canada, and Europe met in Washington D.C., for the International Council of Women. Most European, Asian and African countries did not pass women's suffrage until after World War I. The very first to take step was New Zealand in 1893 a self-governing British colony, granted adult women the right to vote. Though Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837 at the age of 18 and she was queen for 64 years, one of the longest reigns in history but Europe had a very long struggle before granting right to vote for women.

The first European country to introduce women's suffrage was Finland, then part of the Russian Empire, which elected the world's first female members of parliament in the 1907 parliamentary elections. Norway followed, granting full women's suffrage in 1913. Others slowly joined. On March 19, 1911, IWD (International women's day) was marked for the first time, by over a million people in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland. Women demanded that women be given the right to vote and to hold public office. Although there were some women-led strikes, marches, and other protests in the years leading up to 1914, none of them happened on March 8. In 1914 International Women's Day was held on March 8, possibly because that day was a Sunday, now it is always held on March 8 in all countries. Observance of the Day is dedicated to women's right to vote but now as known it's just a public holiday or a day to express greetings for women. One of the most recent jurisdictions to acknowledge women's full right to vote was Bhutan in 2008 (its first national elections). Coming to UN, The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Political Rights of Women, which went into force in 1954, enshrining the equal rights of women to vote, hold office, and access public services as set out by national laws. The UN theme for International Women's Day 2014 is "Equality for Women is Progress for all".

Women's Voting History in India:

The sex ratio of voters which is defined as the number of women voters to every 1,000 men voters, increased very impressively from 715. The fact that more women are voluntarily exercising their constitutional right of adult suffrage across all states in India is testimony to the rise of self-empowerment of women to secure their fundamental right to freedom of expression. This is an extraordinary achievement in the world's largest democracy with 717 million voters of which 342 million voters are women. Travelling to history, When Lord Edwin Montague, Secretary of State for Foreign Policy India, came to India to join the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford to survey the political scene with a view to introduce constitutional reforms. Indian women saw an opportunity to demand political rights. This led to the foundation of the Women's

Indian Association (WIA) in 1917 by Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinarajadasa, all three Irish women Theosophists, who had been suffragettes in their own country. A Memorandum signed by 23 women from different parts of the country, demanding votes for women on the same terms as men which would enable them to have a say in political matters was submitted to Montague and Chelmsford. The Indian National Congress at its session in Calcutta in 1917, over which Annie Besant presided, supported the demand of votes for women and so did the Muslim League. The Southborough Franchise Committee toured India in 1918 to gather information. It accepted women's petitions but was initially reluctant to grant the franchise to women as it felt that Indian women were not yet ready for it. The Joint Parliamentary Committee of Parliament finally agreed to remove the sex disqualification but left it to the provincial legislatures to decide how and when to do so. Travancore-Cochin, a princely state, was the first to give voting rights to women in 1920, followed by Madras and Bombay in 1921. Other states followed. Franchise was of course extremely limited. Women could vote only if they possessed qualifications of wifehood, property and education. The Government of India Act of 1935 increased the number of enfranchised women and removed some of the previous qualifications. All women over 21 could vote provided they fulfilled the qualification of property and education. Women also became legislative councilors. In the elections held in 1926, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya stood for the Madras Legislative Council elections from Mangalore but was defeated by a narrow margin. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was the first woman to become legislative councilor in Madras in 1927. Women had to wait till after independence to get universal adult franchise.

Constitutional Safeguards:

The constitution of India guarantees to all women, equality [article 14]; no discrimination by the state [article 15 (1)]; equality of opportunity [article 16]; equal pay for equal work [article 39(d)]; renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women [article 51 (a) (c)] the constitution also allows the state to make special provision in favor of women and children [article 15(3)]; and securing just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief [article 42]. Women politicized the domestic sphere with the support and encouragement of nationalist leaders, and many significant activities were undertaken from within the domestic sphere. Women's political action should not be limited to supporting men's political aspirations. We find that systematically the gender bias in voting is being reduced, over time and across all states of India. Women's participation at higher decision-making levels is still limited and needs to be expanded if the practice of democracy is to be consistent with its theory and intent.

Conclusion

Women in Indian politics always have had to balance between being a non-sexual equal to men, whilst still remaining a feminine female icon drawing on Hindu-religious lines. Only a few women have managed this delicate balance act, while most women have been excluded from the political arena. The majority of the women who have managed to negotiate their way into elected bodies have for a long period only been left with the political dealings connected to the personal sphere. The process has gone through different stages, but has often returned to similar arguments for and against women's rights, women's role in the political game and the political assignments that has been regarded belonging to the feminine sphere. The women's movement has been, and still is divided along the lines of class, caste and religion, as well as economic status and education. There is still a need for a strong women's movement that can unify across the dividing lines present in India, and there will still be fights to be fought, but Indian women have a historic opportunity to have a real influence and power in the society.

Reference

- Sen, Samita (2002). Towards a Feminist Politics? The Indian Women's Movement in Historical Perspective, in Karen Kapadia (red.) *The Violence of Development. The Politics of Identity, Gender & Social Inequalities in India*. London & New York: Zed Books, 2002.
- Kabeer, Naila (2003). *Gender Mainstreaming in Poverty Eradication and the Millenium Development Goals. A handbook for policy-makers and other stakeholders*. Commonwealth Secretariat, International Development Research Centre, Canada.
- SakuntalaNarasimhan (1992), *Sati: widow burning in India*. KnopfDoubleday Publishing Group.
- The Times of India (2008), *Breaking News: Woman jumps into husband's funeral pyre*.http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/India/Woman_jumps_into_husbands_funeral_pyre/articleshow/3587874.cms
- SwapanDasgupta, (2010). Women's quota Bill restricts democracy, Columnist 7th of March 2010, the Daily Pioneer.
- Vicky Randall, (2006). Legislative Gender Quotas and Indian Exceptionalism. *The Travails of the Women's Reservation Bill*. *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Oct., 2006), pp. 63-82. Published by Ph.D. Program in Political Science of the City University of New York.
- Black, N. (1992). "Ripples in the second wave: comparing the contemporary women's movement in Canada and the united states." in *challenging times, the women's movement in Canada and the united states*, ed. c. backhouse and d. h. Flaherty. Montreal: McGill-queen's university press.
- Desai, M. (2001). "India, women's movements from nationalism to sustainable development." in *women's rights: a global view*, ed. l. Walter. Westport, ct: greenwood press.
- Dumont, M. (1992). "the origins of the women's movement in Quebec." in *challenging times, the women's movement in Canada and the united states*, eds. c. backhouse and d. h. Flaherty. Montreal: McGill-queen's university press.
- Dutt, M. (2000). "Some reflections on united stateswomen of color and the united nations fourth world conference on women and NGO forum in Beijing, china." in *global feminisms since 1945*, ed. b. g. smith. London: Routledge.
- Giddings, P. (1984). *When and where i enter, the impact of black women on race and sex in America*. New York: William morrow.
- Kumar, R. (1995). "From Chipko to sati: the contemporary Indian women's movement." in *the challenge of local feminisms, women's movements in global perspective*, ed. a. Basu. Boulder, co: West view press.
- Nelson, B. J. and Carver, K. A. (1994). "Many voices but few vehicles: the consequences for women of weak political infrastructure in the united states." in *women and politics worldwide*, ed. B. J. Nelson and N. Chowdhury. New haven, ct: Yale university press.
- Tripp, A. M. (2000). "rethinking difference: comparativeperspectives fromafrica." *signs* 25(3):649–76.
- Walter, l. (2001). "denmark: women's rights and women's welfare." in *women's rights: a global view*, ed. l. walter. westport, ct: greenwood press.