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POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND GENDER JUSTICE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO WOMEN'S RESERVATION BILL

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"There is no chance for the welfare of the society unless the condition of women improves. It is not possible for a bird to fly with only one wing"

-Swami Vivekananda

Introduction:

Demographically women occupy half of the population but they lagged behind in every sphere of life such as education, employment, property rights, etc. One such arena where women lag behind is political horizon where one can find marginal presence of women. Again presence of women is positively remarkable in every field where they participate, they top the secondary, higher education and lead many corporations during employment. It means women have potential to transform the situations they handle except politics.

Gender justice and political empowerment of women:

"Gender inequities throughout the world are among the most all pervasive though deceptively subtle forms of inequality. The process of gender justice, broadly speaking covers rights of women against exploitation and victimization. The process of conferment of right on women and their empowerment has come to be recognized as gender justice. Attaining social justice and peace through empowerment of women is basically another description of the same process. This process is multidimensional ranging from private sphere (home) to public sphere (outside the home)." (A.S. Aanand 2002) Women successfully reach key positions and stay there firmly in all spheres except politics even though they constitute half of the suffrage. They are unable to convert their population into votes. Obvious reason for this is discrimination of women on the ground of sex and inability of men to accept the leadership of women with few exceptions.

Gender justice is an outcome, implies access to and control over resource in combination with agency. This indicates that equal opportunities should be created for both men and women so as to enjoy resources equally and achieve expected goals. In other way gender justice is considered as process; continuous and consistent. The social institutions should be answerable and accountable for any injustice towards women, because they are established to render justice equally without discrimination and one of the facets of doing justice towards women is their political empowerment through reservation.

Political Empowerment of women:

The concern for women's political equality in India first emerged as a political issue during the national movement in which women were active participants. As early as 1917, Indian women raised the issue of representation in politics, which at the time meant a demand for universal adult franchise. By 1929 women had the right to vote on the basis of wifehood, property and education. Under the Government of India Act 1935, all women over 21 could vote provided they fulfilled the conditions of property and education. Post-independence, newly adopted constitution of India guaranteed equality

and liberty, thereby enabling women to participate in electoral politics on an equal basis with men. They also continued to play a significant role in less conventional political activities such as environmental movement, anti-alcohol agitation, peace movement and even revolutionary activities. (Deepak Bishoyi 2007)

Women suffrage in independent India commenced along with independence but their participation as policy makers remained passive for a long time. Women could not participate in policy making directly through Parliament or Assembly for many reasons of which patriarchy is at its root. Under patriarchy all rights, civil as well as political rights are concentrated in the hands of men and as such men are highly reluctant in sharing theses rights with women especially political rights. Political rights give birth to other rights in democracy. Rights emit and flow from legislative bodies and hence control of rights is in the hands of those who are sitting in such legislative bodies i.e. men. 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India resulting into reservation to women in local governing bodies such as village panchayat, bloc etc. was passed only after more than three decades of independence. However, Bill conferring reservation for women in Parliament and Legislative Assemblies could not be passed till date when we are about to pass almost seven decades after becoming democratic and republic.

Reservation of seats is a basic, consistent and logical step towards both women's emancipation and inclusive development - particularly for a government which promised that the "equal access to participation and decision making of women in the social, political and economic life of the nation" would be at the heart of its agenda (National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001).

Effect of Reservation for women in PRIs:

Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) underwent revolution with 73rd and 74th Amendments providing opportunity to women to participate in the Institutions not only as voters but also as policy makers. In order to examine the efficacy of Women Reservation Bill, it will be useful to study the role played by women in PRIs after 73rd and 74th Amendments. This will certainly help in evaluating not only the role played but also capability of women to work in political arena.

Political reservation significantly increases the influence of women in policy decisions of local government in rural India. Women elected under reservation invest more in public goods that are more reflective of women's policy priorities, such as drinking water. Although reservations bring into office leaders who are relatively inexperienced, who have less political ambition and fewer political prospects, and are of lower socioeconomic status, there is no evidence that these characteristics affect their investment decisions. Differences in investment made by reserved and unreserved village councils can be attributed simply to differences in gender of the pradhan. While the investments made by village councils reserved for a woman were more consistent with the goods petitioned for by villagers, female council heads are no more responsive to petitions in general than their male counterparts. The mechanism seems to be that women leaders have the same kind of preferences and development priorities as other women. Similarly, councils reserved for SCs tended to invest more in goods located in SC communities: the share of investment targeted at goods located in SC communities is 14% higher in councils reserved for them. (J-PAL 2006)

This clarifies that women performed very well as members of PRIs when they were given opportunity. Initially when reservation was provided for women in PRIs, it was doubted whether women would be able to work as members of PRIs in view of male dominancy but study carried by J-PAL revealed that if women pradhans did simply reflect the views of their husbands we would see no difference between villages formally run by women and others.

While the research found that women in reserved seats are less experienced, have less ambition and lower prospects in politics, and are of lower socioeconomic status, there is no evidence that these differences are driving the results. It appears that it is the gender of the local leader that explains the

different investment decisions in villages reserved for women. In other words, a world run by women would look decidedly different, and for whatever reason, women leaders do seem to better represent the needs of women. This is true even in an environment such as rural Rajasthan, where women traditionally have very little power, where female literacy is very low, and where many believe women leaders simply implement the wishes of their husbands. But don't underestimate these women, the research shows they are in fact changing realities on the ground. (J-PAL 2006)

Women Reservation Bill: History and Future

After reservation for women in PRIs, now its turn to enhance its umbrella in wider field i.e. Parliament and State Legislatures. The women Reservation Bill is in debate since last three decades but still on the way to reach its destiny. Multiple reasons are there that are responsible for its failure to clear the hurdles in its way. It took 2008 for the WRB to germinate i.e. to have positive results when it was passed in Rajya Sabha, since then it is waiting to be passed in the Lok Sabha. Women not only constitute half of the population but also play key role in every institution of society. Women play vital role in family, consequently in society and hence they need representation in law making too. However they are unable to reach the Parliament as representatives of people for many reasons such as illiteracy, poverty, socio-economic conditions, political climate and inequalities inherent in the social structure, its norms and values, customs and rituals.

During 1990's, the issue of women reservation was in the manifesto of various political parties which was also a way of wooing women voters. Women reservation bill was first introduced by Deve Gowda led national front government in September, 1996 as the 81st amendment bill. In 1998, Atal Bihari Vajpai government presented 84th amendment bill for 33% reservation for women. The 12th Lok Sabha too failed to pass the bill. In the year 1999, December 23rd, the bill was again presented in the Lok Sabha. But due to lack of consensus amongst different 88 political parties, bill was rejected. UPA government adopted a different strategy. It has presented the 85th amendment bill in the Rajya Sabha so that it does not lapse with the dissolution of Lok Sabha. The bill was passed in the Rajya Sabha on the 9th March 2010. The bill's fate remains uncertain till its final passage by the Lok Sabha.

One irony that appears from the history of the Bill is that two major political parties who led the governments, Indian National Congress (INC) and Bharatiy Janata Party (BJP) both support the Bill but the Bill could not be passed till date. Even in the present Lok Sabha where BJP enjoys majority, the Bill could not be passed till date. From the historical study of the Bill, it really seems difficult that it would be passed in near future as the views of almost all the parties appears to be unchanged even today. Secondly, all the present politicians surely will bring women into politics from their families only, may be wife, daughter, daughter-in-law or like.

Implications of the Bill:

To study the effect of Women Reservation Bill, it is necessary to examine the main provisions of the Bill, as introduced in the Rajya Sabha in May 2008 and these are:

(1) Not less than one-third of seats to be reserved in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for women;

(2) One-third of the total number of seats reserved under clause (2) of article 330 (the existing quota for Schedule Castes and Scheduled Tribes) to be reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes or the Scheduled Tribes;

(3) Reservation of seats to cease to exist or expire after 15 years of the commencement of the constitutional amendment;

(4) To select women candidates through a system of rotation, by which one third of the total number of constituencies to be reserved for women candidates will be determined through a draw of lots;

(5) To consider extending the reservation to Rajya Sabha and the Legislative Councils of States, without making any definite provisions within the scope of the current Bill.

Impediments in implementation of Bill:

The provisions of WRB will certainly help to elevate the political status of women but this alone would not work due to some reasons that are also responsible for seldom presence of women in political arena. The reasons are multiple such as illiteracy of women, poverty, disinterest of political parties to allow women to contest elections to women, lack of social participation of women, lack of money power and muscle power on the part of women, family support and many more. Even if Bill is passed, it may not give the requisite results initially and it will take some time to create awareness amongst all about need and importance of political participation of women.

WRB and Political Empowerment of women:

Democracy Though it is not possible to empower the women completely through political reservation as this will not bring capable women into politics but it might bring proxies or dummies in the politics. It has been raised as a concern that only women from the ruling classes will be elected, and that these women are likely to be "proxy women" acting under direction from husbands, family members or party officials (CLRA 2008). However this doubt or fear is not real completely as there are examples of women in India who imprinted their positive and successful image in politics even if they have come from ordinary families. Ms. Mayawati, Ms. Mamata Banarjee, Ms. Sumitra Mahajan are few examples of it. To this end, it is also necessary that power of women as voters is to be capitalized so that women from amongst ordinary women would participate actively in positive decision making.

Conclusion:

Gender justice is one of the facet of political justice. Women are reluctant in joining politics especially decision making but they are not so as voters. Environment conducive for women in political arena would certainly make the women to participate in politics and reservation for women is one step towards it. WRB if passed will surely help the women in performing herculean job. Mass participation in policy making augments the democratic growth. It will also help women to overcome the hurdles that are there specially for women and proceed with greater pace. India being fastest developing country in the world, it becomes duty of everyone to take essential steps to enhance participation of women in policy making. Successful women in every sector show that they are not incapable but they only want opportunity, support and stake from all members such as those from family, society, institutions that work for women.

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