

Woman and Political Participation : An Indian Context

Dr. G. C. Pandey

*Asso. Prof., DepTt. of Sociology,
KGK College, Moradabad, U.P.
E-mail gcpmbd@gmail.com*

Abstract

Political space has always been the male domain. Issues about women's equal participation in the political space have been debated for a long time. At independence the Indian constitution granted women equal rights of participation in political process as in democracy all the citizens should be active partners to make it a vibrant one. Women's low status in society, low level of literacy, poor awareness of their constitutional rights and responsibilities accentuated their invisibility in political space and low participation. The domination of caste system, patriarchy and combination of power equations restrict women to exercise their political rights. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment which gives women 33% reservation of the seats at all levels of Panchayat system has been widely perceived as a crucial step for empowering women through political participation. This paper argues the impact of this amendment on women's political participation, space enlargement and capability enhancement has been differential.

Keywords: Space, Power, Capability, Equity, Choices, Empowerment, Political participation

Reference to this paper
should be made as
follows:

Received: 08.03.19
Approved: 15.03.2019

Dr. G. C. Pandey

*Woman and Political
Participation : An
Indian Context*

*RJPSS 2019, Vol. XLIV,
No. 1, pp. 105-113*

Article No. 14

Online available at:
[https://anubooks.com/
?page_id=5262](https://anubooks.com/?page_id=5262)

Introduction

Politics has always been the 'male domain' and women's access to political power, space and to decision making has been denied. Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose ideas inspired French Revolution, advocated women's exclusion from politics in 1762. The American Declaration of Independence also denied right of equal participation to women in politics. On the country, thinkers like J.S. Mill vocally supported the idea of gender equality in every walk of life including politics. According to Mill "the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes- the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement, and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of equality, admitting no power or privilege on one side, nor disability on the other."(1960).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of one's country. But women still do not have equal access to political space and power. Women are marginalized in political sphere due to masculine prejudices. Irrespective of the developmental process women's participation in political space remains limited even in most developed and democratic countries.

Women's access to political space, participation in political process and decision making is critical not only to their capability and to overcome social inequalities but also to strengthen the democracy in the true sense. Redistribution of political power and space can make political participation a reality for women through which they can make choices, become visible and raise voice to exercise their political right. It can result in right to vote according to their will, choice and freedom to contest election and to play role in decision making process at various levels.

Indian Context

Gandhi in 1931 itself emphasized that the reconstruction and development of Indian nation would not be possible without full participation of women as equal partners.

The virtual invisibility of women in political sphere especially in rural India led to 73rd constitutional amendment to Indian Constitution to provide 33 percent reservation of seats at all levels of Panchayat system. It has been perceived as a landmark for empowering women and an opportunity to step out of the shadow.

The present paper argues that the impact of 73rd amendment to Indian Constitution on the participation of women in public space, capability enhancement and space expansion has been differential. When women get access to decision

making position, with their sensitivity and innovation they can build up their capabilities to match the expectation and the need.

Conceptual Framework

Space is different from capability as used by Sen (1990) and developed by Martha Nussbaum (2000). But space and power are related to and can work as catalyst in capability enhancement. Space allows a person to move and get access to a place, freedom or margin, to do what she/he intend to do. The space determines a person's capacity to act or to take decision. Therefore, denial of space amounts to lack of power or to capability deprivation and use of space can be empowering process for women (Ranadive, 2005). Thus space, power and capability are interrelated.

The concept of power can be traced to Max Weber's classical work on 'power' which refers to the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance' (Weber cited in Mizan 1994:80). Combining different theories of Mizan (1994), J. Deshmukh - Ranadive (2005), and Foucault (1980) it can be argued that power is a web which is spread at every site of society such as household, families and public sphere.

Combining the above conceptual proposition on the power, space creation and capability enhancement of women could be viewed as a process of creating avenues for them to gain "power to" make life choices and be self reliant (Bisnath and Elson, 1999:4)

The empowerment can be assessed as a process through which the powerless gain control over the circumstances of their lives (Kabeer 1999, 2001, 2005; Malhotra and Schuler 2005). According to Kabeer (1999), S. Bisnath and D. Elson (1999) empowerment occupies three tiers of power spectrum: power to (solve problems, take decisions and make choices), power within (assertiveness and power to recognize and analyze how power operated in their lives and gain confidence to act in order to influence and change) and power with involves sharing power with others (men) for a common purpose to achieve collective goals). A composite of these tiers refers to improved condition of women in the power structure where choices, space, power and capabilities of marginalized and powerless get expansion.

Discussion

This conceptual framework is used in the context of elected women representatives. 'Capability' becomes all the more important in case of, elected women representatives (EWRs hereafter) as it is essentially related to the idea of freedom and range of alternatives and options one has in deciding what type of life to lead

(Sen 1990). The expansion of 'space' does not always suddenly make a person confident to acquire the space and to exercise the power but as a slow process it can alter the situation, because 'human beings are creatures such that; provided with the educational and material support, they can become fully capable of all (these) human functions. That is, they are creatures with certain lower level capabilities (basic-capabilities) to perform the function in question.

When these capabilities are deprived of nourishment that would transform them into the higher level capabilities, they are fruitless, cut off in some way but a shadow of themselves'. (Nussbaum, 2000:83) Thus, places where women enjoy unrestricted social spaces, have a better level of literacy, are places where women's participation in work force and in public sphere is higher and where women are able to carve a place for themselves. There are examples from different states of India where women contested election, occupied position of decision making and contributed to functioning of that body like Panchayat even prior to 73rd Amendment Act. It not only gave women the visibility and space but voice also. There are many studies that especially show and point out the difference which women members have made to nature and process of decision-making. Conceptually the slogan 'power to the people' (read women) and 'power to' are related to capability and space and symbolize the capacity to carry the intent forward. In a positive connotation it is linked to initiatives towards empowerment, power to make decisions, to solve problems, can be creative and enabling.

Therefore, in the context of EWRs power meant giving priority to issues and choices which were close to women and community. Studies show that steps taken to politically empower women have been positive in improving the surroundings whether urban or rural. With 73rd Amendment to Constitution that reserved 33 percent of village Panchayat and pradhan position for women, there are many examples of women representatives transforming their villages Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004).

Researches suggest that behaviour can help/ensure good governance. Where women's decision making power is higher in public sphere, rate of corruption is lower. The reason may be that they believe in accountability and are more likely to be altruistic and community oriented (World Bank, 2001:96). When resources are controlled by women, it is more likely that they are used to benefit the community; children and common good as compared to when male have full control of resources. World Bank report (2001) clearly shows that women are under-represented at local, State and national level in India. On average, they have less than 10 percent seats in parliament.

However, in other parts of the country where women's space in the family and society is restricted, political participation and decision making power is low, provisions of 73rd Amendment have not made much difference. This is particularly true of states in the northern India such as U.P. as is evident from many studies on role played by the elected women representatives. Studies indicate that reservation alone cannot make a difference in actual participation, decision-making, and exercise of power and use of space. Prior to passing of the 73rd Amendment, election to Panchayat bodies were not held regularly in U.P. although politically, it has been one of the most important states of Indian Union, having 80 seats in the Lok Sabha. U.P. has the characteristics of regional imbalances in economic and social development. Western U.P. is agriculturally productive and prosperous. It is relatively Industrialized and urbanized. On the country, Eastern U.P. is marked by low agricultural production, less industrialization and urbanization making this region less developed with poor infrastructural facilities.

U.P. Government introduced two very important measures to ensure social justice. Firstly, the 73rd Amendment provided reservation to dalits and women and whereby changed the composition of Panchayat by giving the so-called lower castes predominant position in these institutions. If the majority of the population in the village is dalit or backward caste, then pradhan must be a woman from one of the communities. Thus, post 1995 Panchayat election, women belonging to dalit community are being elected to the post of pradhan.

However, in reality, just to fulfill constitutional requirement they contested election in place of their husbands, who still carry out all the function of pradhan. Before the election at meeting in the dalitmohalla, politically or economically, influential and powerful families decided to let their women contest the election. The election was really contested between the prosperous and powerful dalit families and not the women. Some of the contestants were also supported and approved by other dominant castes. Secondly, villages with large dalit population were identified as Ambedkar villages by the U.P. Government. Under this scheme, existing grant allocation for development and welfare programmes such as IRDP, JRY etc. were doubled for a two year period and channeled through the block and gram panchayat. This has made the post of pradhan very important as it given him or her considerable powers of patronage and oblige others. Villagers are dependent upon pradhan for availing the benefits of various schemes. Therefore, caste based reservation and distributions of benefits of welfare schemes have been a more determining factor than reservation for women (Pai,S. 1998).

The EWRs are unable to play significant role in the functioning of gram and block level bodies of Panchayat. It is pradhan's duty to make information regarding welfare schemes and funds available to gram panchayat samiti and call meetings to get suggestion and discuss the decision to be taken. However, in reality pradhanpati and some of the powerful people of village, who are members of block samiti meet and take all the decisions without ever consulting the elected women pradhan. They only put their signature on the papers sent to them. Studies show (Pai, 1998) that women agreed to contest election due to family and community pressure and not due to their own choice. The families and community wanted to take advantage of the political space provided to women. Consequently women were not able to expand their space due to familial pressure, lack of education, inequality at family level. We find people ready and eager to believe in any negative observation or statement that can be made about their performance in Panchayat. Hence, this new description of EWRs as proxy, namesake members, sarpanchpati and pradhanpati has gained currency (Buch,1999). Studies attest that female pradhans can be dismissed as being namesake for husbands, sons or powerful neighbors (Leiten,1996). Even after getting elected as member or gram pradhan women's access to space is limited to their own houses and many of them do not feel comfortable in the company of their male colleagues. Space is so limited that women are not supposed to come out without their veil in front of 'strangers' or 'others', specially men and talking or arguing is out of question. Studies indicate women pradhans were side lined by their male counterparts. This can be interpreted that even today there exists the patriarchal resistance to women's access to public and political space, except only when due to some constraints 'perceived contribution response' (Sen, 1990) factor work and men try to exercise power indirectly through their women.

The poor level of participation of women acquire greater concern in view of the fact that mere membership or position in Panchayati Raj Institutions(PRI hereafter) does not reflect required participation of women in these bodies to ensure the exercise of power and space. Different studies document the problems women face in exercising the legitimate power to access the political space, and in discharging their duties as members of PRIs. Moreover, patriarchal bias in society has been a major hurdle for women's active participation. There are enough studies and literature that indicates the women still are proxy members while real functions are discharged by their male relatives. Panch-pati and sarpanch-pati have emerged as significant political actors in U.P.(Leiten and Srivastava, 1999).

Most of the government officials like working with male relatives of elected

women representatives (MARG,1989). Their level of comfort is higher with men, even though there is no lack of dynamism or leadership qualities among rural women, nor are they unaware of their own needs and those of development. Internalization of their subordinate status and culturally imposed constraints have made women diffident and fearful of taking part in public affairs. In addition, they have been systematically passed over, not only by men in their families and villages but also by the agencies of state and local power structures. They have been discouraged by traditional values and used as proxies of men (Mazumdar, 1989).

Conclusion

Equality can change and improve the situation if all the members have equal bargaining power in society. In primitive society women also worked outside the home and their contribution to work outside the home was equal to that of the male of their society. Agricultural revolution expanded options for men, and women were slowly pushed to periphery from the centre which worsened the position of women (Boserup, 1990) in India, where land rights were exclusively in male hands. Women became subjugated, dependent and were denied access to economic as well as political space.

Sen (1990) has argued that bargaining within family is quite complex due to 'perceived contribution response' and 'perceived interest response'. In this context EWRs/women do not get enough public/political space due to clout within family and society and their perception regarding contribution to it. Secondly, women have low self-esteem and awareness due to which they do not pursue unconventional goals. Another reason for this attitude being mental/social conditioning. Keeping this view, in mind, one can say that women have lesser choices. Women in a patriarchal society use co-operation and maternal altruism as strategies to minimize risk and conflict (Kabeer,1994), but when they get the right opportunity they try to make optimum use of it. A directive change can become reality when there is some appropriate policy intervention. This in turn, can improve their political participation and remove preconceived notions about them.

References

1. Sen S. and D. Elson 1999. *Women's Empowerment Revisited*, Background Paper for Progress of the World's women: A New Biennial Report. www.uniyem.org/progressww/empower.html.
2. Ben-Ner and H. Wang.2006. '*Identify and Self-other Differentiation in Work and Giving Behaviour in A Goal's Women Making Choices*'. IJGS, 14:3 (2007).

3. Boserup, E. 1990. 'Economic Change and roles of Women'. in Irene Tinker (ed.) *Persistent Inequalities*. NY:OUP.
4. Buch. N. 1999. 'From Oppression to Assertion - A Study of Panchayats and Women in MP, Rajasthan and UP'. ND:CWDS.
5. Chattopadhyay, R and E, Duflo. 2004. 'Impact of Reservation Panchayati Raj: Evidence from a Nationwide Randomized Experiment, EPW, 39(9):979-85.
6. Deshmukh, R. J. 2005. 'Gender, Power and Empowerment in D. Narayan (ed.) *Measuring Empowerment: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives*, Washington DC: The World Bank.
7. Foucault, M. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (ed.) C. Gordon, Brington: Harvester Press.
8. Kabeer, N. 1994. *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*. London: Verso.
9. Kabeer, N. 1999. 'Resources, Agencies and Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment', *Development and Change*, 30(3): 435-64.
10. Kabeer, N. 2001. *The Power to Choose*, London: Verso.
11. Kabeer, N. 2005. 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Critical Analysis', *Gender and Development*, 13(1): 13-24.
12. Lieten. G.K. 1996. 'Panchayats in Western UP - Namesake Members', EPW, 31.No.39.
13. Leiten, G.K. and Srivastava. 1999. **Unequal Partners: Power Relations, Development in UP. ND: Sage.**
14. Malhotra, A. and S.R. Schuler. 2005. *Women's Empowerment as a Variable in International Development in D. Narayan (ed.) Measuring Empowerment Cross disciplinary Perspective*, Washington DC: The World Bank.
15. MARG. 1989. *They Call me Member Saab - A Study of Panchayat in Haryana Panchayati Raj*. ND:MARG.
16. Mazumdar, V. 1989. *Foreword in Women in Panchayati Raj Structure* by P. Manikyamba. ND:GPH.
17. Mill, J.S. 1960. *On Liberty, Representative Government, The Subjection of Women - Three Essays*, OUP.

18. Mizan, A. 1994. *In Quest of Empowerment: The Grameen Bank Impact on Women's Power and Status*. Dhaka: Grameen Bank
19. Nussbaum, M.C. 1995. 'Emotions and Women's Capabilities' in M.C. Nussbaum and J. Glover (eds.) *Women, Culture and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.