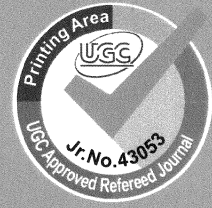


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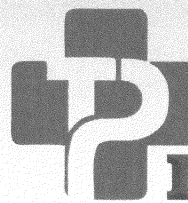


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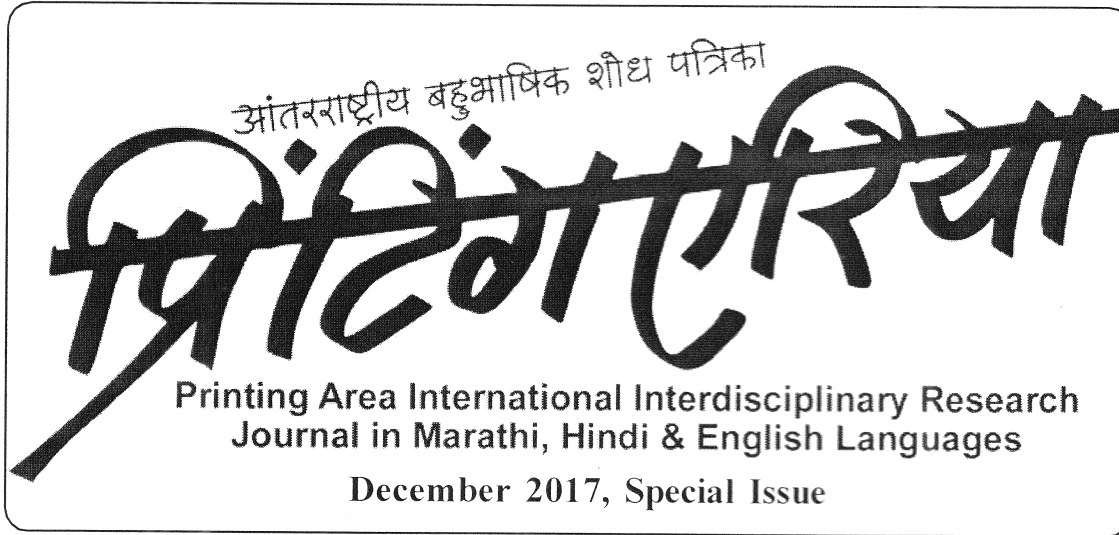


Changing Trends & Issues in Indian Politics

(Volume : II)

Chief Editor:
Dr. Anant Madan Awati





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Assistant Professor & Head, Dept. of Political Science,
Shri Vyankatesh Arts, Commerce and Science College,
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Moblie : 9421395187/9545195875



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06

Women Empowerment and Politics

Prof. Dr. Sangeeta Kishor Walse,
Sant Bhagwanbaba Arts College,
Sindhkhedraja, District- Buldana

Though politics, one of the main influential forces in the life of the nation, has earned a bad name in public perceptions, it continues to be the most powerful means of socioeconomic transformation. There has been a consistent talk heard on women empowerment. Often, the issue is raised in the State Assemblies and the Parliament, discussions are held. But it appears, the main idea of the women empowerment, in their perception, rests with socioeconomic factors excluding the political empowerment. Whatever the political reasons, it shows the nasty male dominated patriarchal system at its backdrop. The patriarchal society dominates the social, political and economic life. Even after persistent reforms, the society is hardly encouraging women in politics. Though it is dismal picture, the Constitution of India safeguards the rights of women. It becomes an impelling force for the political participation of the women.

Indian democracy has a strong modern outlook for the new world on one hand and the other strong roots in socio-religious traditions inherited from the ancient past. The modern world aims at the equality and empowerment while the traditional world still think women as misfits. But putting aside all cobwebs, in 1993 India took an important step and put in place the elected gram panchayat (local elected body) at the village level by the 73rd Amendment of the constitution. One of the important features

of this Amendment was to give reservations to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women. Understanding its capacity of instilling democratic values in rural local bodies, the government raised reservations of women in all tiers of Panchayat Raj system from 33 percent to at least 50 percents.

The panchayat Raj system is a state subject. It is the prerogative of states to increase the quota of women reservation if the actual reservation in that state is less than 50 percent. It was Bihar state, which first offered 50 percent reservation to women in rural local bodies. Maharashtra followed the suit and provided 50 percent seats in local bodies for women in 2011.

Political Reservation Must for Women Empowerment

Though women have taken a plunge in socioeconomic activities, the political activities are restricted to rural local bodies. Male dominated patriarchal structural of the society hardly gives impetus to their social and economic rights. Again, their claim and presence in rural local bodies are overshadowed by the men in their families. So unless, reservation at the state and union bodies are imparted to women, they could not be fully empowered. Presently, female presence in India's state and national legislatures hovers at ten percent. Concerns that this limits the political voice available to women have led to the introduction and subsequent passage of a Reservation Bill in the Upper house of the Indian Parliament. The bill seeks to reserve 33% of India's state and national legislature positions for women. If implemented 181 out of the 543 National legislators and 1,370 out of the 4,109 State legislators would be women.

Women Participation and the Challenges

The growing participation of women is being appreciated by the world. On women participation in local politics, in 2007 the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democratic Index gave a score of 7.68 out of 10. India ranked of

35 out of 167 countries. This in itself may not seem bad, but it is a well known fact that India has a democracy with some flaws. Widespread illiteracy of the population and corruption in the political system are some of the degrading features.

Further, 'status of women' in India is quite inferior when compared to the other countries. The Global Gender Gap Report 2010 points out that India ranked 112 out of 134 countries. Similarly, UNDP's Gender-related development index (GDI) and various approaches to improve upon it, India is in the bottom third of all countries.

There is also the fear that a women sarpanch may become just a front for the 'real' sarpanch who would be somebody from her family, usually her husband. Thus it is unclear whether female sarpanchs can make a difference. According to a study, some 80% women sarpanchs in Tamil Nadu indicated that their official decisions were to be influenced by their husbands, potentially pointing towards limited autonomy in decision-making.

Further, India is characterized by large gender gaps in key human development indicators such as child mortality and malnutrition as well as levels of antenatal coverage, contraceptive use, adolescent fertility, and maternal mortality that are much worse than what is found in countries with similar or even lower levels of per capita income.

According to a social researcher Anderson, discrimination against females originates in marriage practices and caste structures. Despite government efforts these practices are still prevalent in the country. Despite high overall growth since the mid-1990s, some studies suggest that gender gaps widened.

The barriers in Women Empowerment

There are different cultural and societal barriers in increasing active participations of women in politics. Some of the factors could be noted as sexual violence, discrimination and

illiteracy.

• Sexual violence

Some of the social thinkers regard sexual violence as one of the main obstacles in the women's participation in socio-political affairs. A 2011 study found that 24 percent of Indian men have committed sexual violence at some point in their lives. Martha Nussbaum states that violence affects women's participation in socio-political activities.

• Discrimination

Although the Constitution of India has removed inequalities, discrimination continues among castes and gender. Widespread discrimination is one of the major impediments resisting women from participating in politics. Thus, women lack leadership experience in political activities. Impact of description is further increased by caste system. Dalit women are continuously deprived for their political future.

• Illiteracy

India has one of the largest illiterate populations. According United Nations' reports in 2014 points out that there are 287 million adults in India are illiterate. Literacy among women is only 53.7 percent as against 75.3 percent literacy of men. Illiteracy limits the understanding of political systems and issues.

Female Leaders and Public Good Outcomes

A number of influential studies have found that India's efforts to increase female participation in political processes and decision-making had significant impacts. An India-wide study notes that reservations create opportunities which many women are able to utilize. In Maharashtra female policy makers who have come to power through quotas provide more public goods that benefit and are valued by female voters such as water and roads.

In terms of outcomes, reservations were associated with higher levels of child survival, an effect that could arise because female leaders, who are more attuned to the needs of child health, helped to improve access to and

use of services such as antenatal care and public birth facilities. Reserved seats occupied by low-caste or tribal females are also argued to have resulted in higher levels of investment in health and early education and greater efforts to implement redistributive land reforms and inheritance legislation favorable to women.

Different studies made on the women reservation find significant and positive impacts of reservation on Indian politics. It puts positive effects on women. It also benefited lower caste groups who earlier had failed to improve the condition in a rapidly changing society.

Inspired by 50 percent women reservation in rural bodies, the centre government should positively take up the issue of providing 50 percent quota in the state legislature and the parliament. The rural representation proved fruitful increasing women's inclination towards active participation in local bodies. It also strengthens their political understanding on state and national issues.

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