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REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS: SOME OBSERVATIONS

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Abstract: Politics of yester millennia and the roots of participatory democracy have been laid since long, but women were not prudent enough to reason and feel their deficiencies until the last quarter of 20th century. Numerically speaking, women comprise half the population and their exclusion from, if not at all, some walks of life in the human society, has been overlooked. Very lately, these gender-governed issues were realized and it was felt that women, as a class have been ignored since the dawn of politics and the formation of the first government bodies. When we analyze the growth of civilization, social changes and the practice of division of labor, we can mark certain discriminatory approaches that the social psyche has towards the women gender; and these prejudices towards this gender are devoid of the rational of differing physical and mental capabilities between the two sexes.

Keywords: Women, representation, participation, politics, political institutions, gender-justice.

INTRODUCTION :-

Over the years since the UN Declaration of International Women's Year in 1975 and subsequent declaration in the same year of the International Women's Decade (1975-1985), there has been tremendous increase in national and international activities for advancement of the status of women. By now as many as four World Conferences on Women followed by three five-year follow-ups have been organized. But, it has been found that nothing has changed significantly since the years before this spurt of activities commenced in the wake of Women's Decade. Of course, in some countries gender equality movements have achieved formal political gains. Some Latin American countries made significant advances in the 1990s with regard to women's political representation. This was largely attributable to the adoption of various quota systems.

The evolution of Indian women in politics is marked by the involvement of women in the national movement for freedom, which was facilitated by Mahatma Gandhi. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Constitution of India, and the country has also ratified various international and national conventions and human rights instruments to secure the equal rights of women; key among them is Towards Equality Report on the Status of Women in India (1975), National Perspective Plan for Women (1988), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1993), National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001), etc. Despite these promises on paper, actual representation in what is dubbed the "world's largest democracy" remains abysmally low.

OBSERVATIONS:

The present paper seeks to provide a comprehensive study of the women's political participation and representation in legislative institutions and decision-making apparatus in the sample universe of Maharashtra from 1990 to 2010 containing the latest information on the subject with proper and humble acknowledgement of the sources of information, quotations and facts used in so far. The researcher wants to put forth the following observations on the basis of relevant data analysis and respondents' opinions.

1) It has been observed that in India the problem for women is more serious for several reasons. While in many other countries

women are inching forward bit by bit, in India the participation of women in politics has actually come down than it was earlier, both in quantity and quality. Government and politics are more important factors in the economic, social, and power structures in India than in most other countries with stronger civil societies, and so, the effect of women's marginalization in politics is even more detrimental in India. The increasing violence, sexual harassment and victimization of women at the ground level in many of our political parties have made their participation far more hazardous than what was earlier.

2)The Universal declaration of Human rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of his or her country regardless of race, ethnicity, religion or sex. The Committee on the Status of Women in India in its report recognized the problems of women in India and suggested some measures for the women's advancement. The Indian Government in its National Perspective Plan for Women envisaged political and economic emancipation of women, and aimed at restoring to women their rightful place in the society. Almost three decades have been elapsed since the Equality Report was written, but the political parties have remained stubbornly unyielding on the question of mobilizing women candidates in the Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections. Therefore, the change in the political status of women in India has been largely cosmetic and superficial.

3)Progression of politics and government has taken place relentlessly through different phases leaving aside rapid paces in population, development, modernization and globalization. The politics of past few centuries have transfigured from an elitist model to a more popular one; but whether participation, representation and the voice of women in politics is as emphatic as it should be, is a matter of debate and more so of great concern. Thousands years of politics and participatory democracy have been found disproportionate on gender based issues. This realization of inadequate recognition and opportunities to women in society and politics was thought over centuries before, but never turned into reality.

4)It has been observed that women, born under similar circumstances and taking social roles at equal pace with men, at certain point of time in the barricade of history, fell short in the battle of socio-political customs, maneuvers, innovations, traditions, etc. as compared to men; and then obviously men have developed a superego out of it. The belief in the essential submissiveness of women is of extremely ancient origin and is deeply embedded in mythological and religious heritage. However, it is only in the modern epochs that the 'disorder of women' constitutes a general social and political problem. More specifically, it is only with the development of liberal individualism and the arguments of democratic and socialist critics that beliefs about women became an acute issue, though not always acknowledged, in social and political theory and practice.

5)It has been noticed that prominent political scientists like Manu and Rousseau had a different conception on gender with objectionable accounts against women fraternity. Manu, an ancient so called political philosopher of India, has laid down the foundation of political traditions of ancient India. But, unfortunately he gives an unusual and relinquished role to women to play in the social structure. Rousseau describes that the 'disorder of women' engenders all the vices and can bring the state to ruin. Similarly, Freudian philosophies have also advocated the women-psyche to be in a state of conflict, arising out of metamorphoses between the male and female anatomy. These fabricated cultural and social hypotheses by such conspicuous philosophers have served as a prejudiced broth for male-dominated society to flourish upon and defend by.

6)It has been observed that when women have made substantial progress in equalizing with male counterparts, political as well as professional fields possess an invisible semi-permeable glass frame at roof level that selectively allows males to climb up and keep females suspended at a level lower than their potential. Most female managers worldwide are still barred from the top levels of organizations, whether in the private or public sector; and the same is a scene in the political arena. To quote an example when an opportunity is there for any elected member of legislature, the females stay behind or made to stay behind and the males avail the opportunity to be in the Cabinet or on any important committee of the Assembly.

7)Looking at the global scenario, one can see that in majority of the countries, developed or developing, the status of women in the political scene is not that much advanced owing to several factors, local or global, especially the social orientation. On the contrary Nordic countries give a glimmer of hope in the feminine direction. There are wide variations in the average percentage of women in parliament in all regions. Nordic countries have 42 per cent; Americas have 25 per cent whereas Asian countries have 18 per cent women in the lower house. Rwanda, Andorra and Cuba have highest percentage of women parliamentarians worldwide with 63 per cent, 50 per cent and 49 per cent respectively. This positive change has come into being because of socio-political background of equality and democratic equity, party system committed to gender fairness, campaigns and movements for quotas, impact of women representatives and the equal status acts in the last two decades.

8)The Indian perspective of women's participation and representation in politics can be very well concluded from the available statistics. The representation of women in Lok Sabha, the Lower House of Indian Parliament is around 6.59 per cent during last fifteen Lok Sabha general elections, that of Rajya Sabha, the Upper House, is around 9.39 per cent up to 2013 and State Assemblies is around 6.46 per cent during last five assembly elections. The worrisome feature is that, these data have remained relatively static for the last many years and do not show any sign of increasing women's representation. Definitely such bleak figures suggest some strong remedial measures to be undertaken immediately.

9)The researcher has pursued a study on the representation of women in the politics of Maharashtra where it is observed that there is poor representation of women in Maharashtra dwindling with mere 4 to 5 per cent figure during last eleven Vidhan Sabha general elections. A trend can be seen that the percentage of women representation during last four elections (1995, 1999, 2004 and 2009) is found virtually stable at around 4 per cent whereas there are many ups and downs from 1962 to 1990. The under representation of women and absence of women from positions of power and decision-making reinforces their exploitation and deprivation. It is from this perspective that women's greater political representation becomes all the more necessary.

10)The present trend of women's political representation indicates that women's representation in politics requires special consideration, and cannot be left out to the forces that prevalently dominate party politics and government. Today, even the best of our female legislators feel sidelined and powerless within their respective parties. The few women in leadership positions in

various political parties have not been able to facilitate the entry of greater numbers of women in electoral process and party politics, and are an ineffective minority within their own respective political groupings.

11) Not having a critical mass within the political institutions make it difficult for women to center-stage and push their agenda forward. Lack of an active and articulate mass further disadvantages women. Even where women are articulate and assertive, they are deliberately marginalized through the process of exclusion by the dominant and powerful sections in these political institutions.

12) Exclusion of women in decision-making has the effect of nullifying the recognition of women being capable of taking decisions. Obstructions women face while exercising control in negotiating funds, programs, and schemes for their constituencies impairs the enjoyment of being an elected representative. Lack of control over resources and programs impairs the exercising of their rights as elected leaders, which prevents them from fulfilling their promises made to the constituents and in nurturing their constituencies in the desired directions, which has a direct bearing on their chances to win subsequent elections.

13) Inadequate numbers of women in politics makes them vulnerable and voiceless. Women's self-confidence and esteem is affected in a predominantly male set-up, as their male colleagues view them as being weak and ineffective. Cultural inhibitions restrict women in expressing their views and opinions openly in such an intimidating atmosphere. Even when women attempt to express their views, generally they are trivialized and ignored. The presence of women in large numbers would have created an enabling environment, as the mere strength of their numbers would have facilitated their effective participation. It would also encourage them to express their opinions and view points and negotiate on them with their male counterparts.

14) It is observed that despite more initiatives have been undertaken to induct more women into political processes, the enabling environment facilitating women's participation in its real sense is still lacking. There is a dearth of strong women's collectives, NGOs working towards women's political empowerment, as well as strong civil society to encourage and strengthen women's political participation. It is significant to note that stagnation and/or decline in women's political representation rate go contrary to trends in many other fields.

15) In independent India, pervasive gender discrimination results in bypassing and ignoring veteran women politicians. It is far more difficult for women to establish a foothold without patronage from powerful men in the political party as wives, daughters, sisters or even mistresses. This is indeed a matter for serious concern because the political participation level of women in any society acts as a reliable barometer of the health of its democracy. Present democracy can be termed as semi-democracy since nearly half of the population, women fraternity, remains under-represented or unrepresented at all.

16) It has been observed that while the steady increase in the electoral participation and mobilization of women in India has increased the visibility of women in the legislative politics; but, this has not happened in the exercise of executive powers due to lack of presence in the decision-making structures. Women MLAs of Maharashtra, though small in number, are seen in the Cabinet and decision-making positions.

17) Though women have been entering the political arena they are denied positions of power. Even when a few women have been given decision-making positions they do not have political key positions to support them. Also those in power are invariably given 'soft portfolios' which are an extension of women's stereotypical images. These portfolios rarely have the resources or decision-making powers to back women and, therefore, relegate them again to the backseat.

CONCLUSION:

Men in the past centuries believed that politics and women virtually excluded each other and therefore, politics for centuries together remained a male privilege. Democracy, by definition, cannot afford to be gender-blind. Taking into account long-reigned gendered perspectives, making women and men involved in politics at equal pace is the sine qua non for any democratic framework. It must strive towards equality and representation of women and men in decision-making processes and equal opportunities for both sexes. It is essential to look beyond the often asked question of how to increase the number of women in the parliament, and move towards presenting examples and experiences of how women can influence the political processes while working through a parliamentary structure.

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