



Article : Women's Reservations are not sufficient for responsible Democracy

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Introduction :

Maharashtra government has announced fifty percent reservations for women in Panchayati raj.¹ The most awaited and popular decision is welcomed by all, especially by women. The forthcoming elections are going to see the effects of this announcement. The election equations are surely going to change. The forthcoming elections in Maharashtra are going to decide the future of Zilla Parishads, Panchayat Samiti, Municipal Corporations and Municipal Councils. The 50% seats are going to be reserved for women. The passage of the Women's Reservation Bill in Rajya Sabha on 9th March 2010 was also a landmark in the history of women empowerment. The 73rd and 74th amendments are historic landmarks for women participation. It introduces 33% reservation for women in local bodies. but the country in which women population is nearly 50%, should reserve same percentage in political institutions, is a simple logic. The union cabinet had declared 50% reservations for women in Panchayati Raj. It decided amendment in article 243 -D for the same.² The reservations for women are changing the face of male-dominated mainstream politics in India. The elections are important not only for women voters but also for women candidates. The decision of Maharashtra government will surely affect grassroot politics in state. Once again there is need to focus on current happenings.

Current situation :

Today we are having the capable women as the President and the Speaker of Lok Sabha. The women are the leaders of important political parties in country today. They are also enjoying position of Chief Minister in some states. The world's biggest parliamentary democracy is witnessing women's capacity as a politician. The women are actively participating in politics. The women's political participation is important in Panchayat Raj as it is backbone of Indian democracy. The government of Maharashtra announced 50% reservation for women in Panchayat Raj. No one can deny benefits of it. Panchayat Raj is the gateway to

enter in politics at rural level. But will mere reservations for women be sufficient to strengthen democracy?

Women empowerment :

Now a days 'women empowerment' is a key word in development of women. The women empowerment means to change subordinate and suppressed condition of women in every field. The strengthening of women in fields of education, health, economy as well as political decision making are the most important areas to work for to ensure women's empowerment.

Women empowerment and their political participation are co-related. Now a days women both urban and rural are taking interest in their role as voters. As voting is the most important responsibility of citizen, it is a good sign in democratic country like India. Democratic system is based on eternal vigilance of people. Liberty, Equality and Justice are the main principles of democracy. The political awareness among all citizens is safeguard of democracy. The awareness among the women also plays important role in strengthening this system. The empowerment of women is directly related with responsible Democracy. These are a lot of factors which are co-related with women empowerment.

'Education is one of the factors. Education has played a very significant role in changing the position and status of women in society. In modern times, education has attained immense importance as a source of status mobility and consequent social change.'³ The literacy rate is also one of the important factors. The process of political socialization and political awareness both are co-related with literacy. Today literacy rate of males is 75.3% and females is 53.7% at national level as per census of 2001. Rural literacy rate of males is 70.7% and females is 46%.⁴ For the strong democracy educated citizens are important. The education also develops the responsible attitude of voters towards election. Thus the challenge of illiteracy still exists.

According to the NFHS-3rd survey, nationally, 35% of women and 18% of men are not regularly exposed to newspapers/magazines, television, radio. Also only 43% of women between age 15-49 are employed, compared with 87% of men in the same age group. Generally, women are less trained and they are paid less than men. Sometimes difference in income is due to lack of technical knowledge skills to women. There is a gender discrimination in lot of fields and women are not capable enough to fight for their rights. Regarding health, the data is shocking. Nearly 57.9% of the pregnant women in the age group 15-49 were found to be anaemic. Thus in society as well as in family women's health is neglected. There is

a tendency among the women to provide fresh and sufficient food to the male in family on priority, as male is a bread-winner in family. Thus sometimes cultural and social backwardness and lack of knowledge are hindering factors in welfare of women.

Reservations and women's participation in decision- making :

The process of decision making is important in political field. This process reflects power. This process is related to leadership. The participation in this process influences politics. Indian society is male-dominated. Generally, male leadership dominates the process of decision making. The women's participation in this decision making process currently is negligible.

The reservations and actual women's participation in decision-making are two different things. Though reservations are provided, women's actual role in active politics and decision making is questionable. 'Decision making for the community and the exercise of political powers is still regarded as an exclusive male preserve, this is clear from the entirely male composition of the traditional panchayats, either of villages or of caste groups.'⁵

But the reservation will surely provide the platform for women to decide and generate the policies for welfare. The opportunity to participate and represent is the real gift of this quota system. The reservations are significant in our democracy. When the reservations for women were introduced in 1993, the benefits of reservations are enjoyed by male candidates as women are used as just rubber-stamps. The women also entered politics as a need of their family. But now the situation is changing. The educated women candidate are using the political opportunity to serve society. They are enjoying the pride to be a representative of people in democratic country. The women candidates are more aware of their role in urban area. But in rural areas, women candidates are still dominated by males.

Reservations and its effects :

The provision of reservations is the part of efforts to bring the women in active politics. The reservations will provide the opportunity for women candidates to understand and solve the local problems. The local self government has to deal with local problems. These problems are related with day to day life of people. The problems of village is supposed to be solved at village level. Thus local self government is an important part of life of people. The women can understand the problems more sensitively. The problems related to the unemployment, drinking

water, roads , electricity ,schools and health can be solved by women with greater priority. The other problems especially related to women like domestic violence, malnutrition, maternal mortality etc. can be tackled by sincerity by women candidates. The women can change the face of Indian democracy. The progress of local units will surely accelerated due to responsible women candidate. The positive effects of reservations will change the dynamics of politics.

Responsible democracy :

The strong democracy needs the base of efficient grassroots- organizations. ‘ For democracy to be successful at the national level, the grassroots organizations have to be strong. The local authorities have to respond to the felt needs of people. The citizens have to faith in the efficacy of the administrative system so that the distance between people and the government is reduced.’⁶ The democracy is the most popular system today. It is changing speedily with the touch of technology. The public opinion can easily generated due to social networking sites.

For strong and capable democracy all voters are to be aware of democratic values, rights and duties also. Democratic wave is rising in the world today. The basic conditions for the welfare of the people can be enjoyed in Democracy. The dignity of human life can be protected in Democracy. The welfare of human being and protection of fundamental rights can be possible in this system only.

Thus even today Mahatma Gandhi’s thoughts are relevant .The peaceful method of life can be preserved in Democracy only. Mahatma Gandhi had dreamed of self-sufficient villages. ‘The Panchayatiraj as postulated by Mahatma Gandhi, was given a place in article 40 of Indian Constitution. This was really an integral part of the concept of ‘Pooran Swaraj’ His concept of ‘Pooran Swaraj’ meant several levels of autonomous development of local communities.’⁷

Gandhiji’s idealism regarding PanchayatiRaj is relevant even today. PanchayatiRaj can serve as base of people’s participation. ‘GramSabha’ is the most important mean for public participation. There is a need of political awareness among the voters. The voters are direct responsible for their representatives. From the grassroots level, people’s participation should increase. Then in the real sense reservations for women will serve as important decision. As a voters and as a citizen women can contribute a lot. The political awareness among women must be increase. Pandit Nehru said , “India will progress only when the people living in villages become politically conscious. The progress of our country is bound up with the progress in our villages.”⁸

The village is basic unit for country’s progress. To connect the rural area with

technologically literate cities, the candidates must be well educated and capable. The common voters should be aware of challenges in society.

The reservations for women is surely a positive step but it is a 'mean' not the 'end'. Through this opportunity women's political awareness should be accelerated. 'According to Lord Bryce the best school of democracy and the best guarantee for its success is the practice of local-self government.'⁹

Efficiency of Democracy is related with local self government. The efficient local self government is the step toward Good Governance. The capable and efficient administration along with the committed representatives are necessary. Not only literacy but proper training for representatives is need of new era. The world is becoming smaller today. There is a need of hi-tech and strong women representative even at grassroots level. The central government has approved special scheme named Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girl-SABLA for girls between age group of 11 to 18. SABLA aims at empowerment of these girls by improving their nutritional and health status.¹⁰ Another scheme named Swadhar is beneficial for women in difficult circumstances. This is beneficial for widows, women affected by natural disaster etc. The help includes basic needs like food and clothing. It also includes emotional supports and legal support.¹¹ The scheme like Swayamsidha is also important for the empowerment of women.¹² The government is providing lot of support for women empowerment, but real need is awareness in women.

Thus , to conclude, the efforts are going on for the empowerment of women. There are various NGOs working for this cause. Even benefits are reaching at grassroots level in various cases. But the grassroots levels women need something more, which can bring a new ray of hope in her life. Not merely reservations but the respect and dignity of women must be maintained inside and outside the family. This is the base of progress of women and ultimately of nations...!

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