

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN: AN OVERVIEW

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### Abstract

*Political participation is the hallmark of a democratic setup. Nature, success and effectiveness of democracy largely depend on the extent to which equal, effective and actual participation is provided by the system to all its citizens. As women comprise about half of the population, this section of society requires due attention in the system and a due share in process. Citizens' active participation in political affairs in a democracy is crucial and necessary because it provides legitimacy to the system and also strengthens the democratic fabric. Democracy implies equality for all human persons, men and women. As against this basic notion of democracy what is normally seen is that women are excluded from different walks of life, more visibly in Politics. The U.N. observes that women constitute "world's largest excluded category". For the attainment of true democratic spirit shall be ensured better political participation. "In the struggle for gender justice", Usha Narayanan argues, "Political participation constitutes the first and foremost step in that direction.". Equal treatment to women in political life, to be meaningful and effective should start from the grassroots level. To provide training and practice in the process of decision-making, the rural democratic institutions are the ideal structures to begin with. One of the aims of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is to accomplish this purpose. "The question of political empowerment of women in rural India has assumed considerable significance recently because of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The amendment provides reservation of seats and posts of chairperson for women in all grassroots level democratic institutions in the countryside known as panchayats. This is a historic step of far reaching implications and significant repercussions on the political process in rural India." The Present Paper analyze the women political participation in general elections of Andhra Pradesh State.*

### Introduction

Political participation is related to 'Right to Vote', participation in decision making process, political activism, political consciousness, etc. Women in India participate in voting, run for public offices and political parties at lower levels. Political activism and voting are the strongest areas of women's political participation.<sup>1</sup> To combat gender inequality in politics, the Government of Andhra Pradesh has reserved seats for women in local governments. With gender-based violence ripping the country apart and appalling apathy becoming more and more evident across political class, it is argued that greater representation of women in Assembly will see an end to it. Even during the campaigning for the 2014 Assembly Elections, most of the parties had vouched to bring in more reforms and make laws more 'women-friendly.' Although the present Assembly has of women, Andhra Pradesh still has to be more accommodating to induct more women MLA's so that issues concerning them get more prominence and are raised frequently in Assembly.

### Political Participation

The study of political participation of any society or section of people needs to take into account whether or not it is associated with democratic values. The level and extent of political participation of people may be restricted

by the very existence of both natural and man-made inequalities. While it is impossible to overcome natural factors of inequalities, it is possible to overcome man-made inequalities simply by adopting and following of democratic principles and values. The pillars of democracy like liberty, equality, fraternity, justice etc. are strong enough to support and protect the people from the challenges posed by man-made Inequalities.

Thus the study of the nature and level of political participation and its resultant empowerment can be evaluated only on the basis of the availability of democratic values. The presence of the umbrella of democracy is a pre-requisite for the attainment of maximum extent of participation and empowerment. Empowerment is not characterized as achieving power to dominate others, but rather power to act with others to effect change. Political participation is a major component of empowerment. "Research in participation and empowerment links them bi-directionally, empowered individuals may be more likely to participate in organizations, and participation promotes empowerment."<sup>2</sup>

The term political participation generally refers to those voluntary activities of members of a society, in the selection of rulers and formation of public policy. Since popular sovereignty is one of the inseparable attributes

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of democracy, the right to participate is an important aspect of democratic government and an inherent right in a democratic process.

Political participation is a basic ingredient of every political system. Participation helps the individual to be effective and associates him with the political system. Higher the rate and levels, the more varied the forms of political participation. It is vital to the proper functioning of a democratic polity. The International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences defined political participation as the principal means by which consent is granted or withdrawn in a democracy and rulers are made accountable to the ruled.<sup>5</sup> It signifies such proceedings like voting, seeking information, discussing and proselytizing, attending meetings, contributing financially and communicating with representatives.<sup>3</sup>

Many writers have rightly argued that political participation of citizens is the distinguishing mark of modern states. More than anything else, the modern state is distinguished from the traditional ones by the extent to which people participate in politics.<sup>4</sup> High levels of political participation are usually associated with democracy, which is beneficial both to the individual and to the society. Political participation has been considered as a 'sine qua non' of democracy.<sup>5</sup>

Political participation has been characterized as a civic duty, as a sign of political health and the best method of ensuring that one's private interests are not neglected. Although political power in every society is monopolized by a few, the incumbents of political authority in every system are found to be quite keen on ensuring some amount of political participation by the people. Thus, by involving the many in the matters of the state, political participation fosters stability and order by reinforcing the legitimacy of political authority.

Political participation is a term that has many meanings. The term is applied to the activities of people from all levels of political system. Sometimes the term is applied more to political orientations than to activities. Political participation is defined in such a way as to include the exercise of power in nongovernmental as well as governmental spheres. It is true that there exists a great deal of confusion with regard to what is meant by that term; "Participation may be viewed from two angles again-intensity and width. How deeply a person is involved in an issue and to what extent he would go towards achievement of this objective would determine the intensity. Width arises because of the complex nature of political activity that requires participation in different issues ranging from casting votes to participating in a technical expert committee or becoming a minister.<sup>6</sup>

### Definitions of Political Participation:

Political participation may be defined as those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or support government and politics.<sup>7</sup> This definition is broader than most others, as it includes not only active roles that people pursue in order to influence political outcomes but also ceremonial and support activities. To Almond and Powell, "political participation is the involvement of the members of the society in the decision making process of the system."<sup>8</sup>

McClosky defines, "political participation implies those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers and directly or indirectly, in the formulation of public policy."<sup>9</sup>

Verba and Pye define it as "Those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and the actions they take.

One of the most controversial questions to be answered in arriving at a definition of political participation is the element of will or intention of the people. In the ultimate analysis political participation means a process of influencing the authoritative allocation of values for a society.

For the successful functioning of democracy the maximum participation of people particularly at the lowest level is required. Panchayati Raj is an important political innovation and a vital conduit in independent India, for popular participation in democratic development. It is envisaged not merely as a method of implementation of rural development policies and the dispersal of developmental benefits, but more importantly, as a training ground for the promotion of local initiative with a view to increasing people's political consciousness, awareness of their rights and direct participation in self-rule.

Political participation is the hallmark of a democratic setup. Nature, success and effectiveness of democracy largely depend on the extent to which equal, effective and actual participation is provided by the system to all its citizens. As women comprise about half of the population, this section of society requires due attention in the system and a due share in process. Citizens' active participation in political affairs in a democracy is crucial and necessary because it provides legitimacy to the system and also strengthens the democratic fabric.<sup>10</sup> Democracy will fail in its objectives if women citizens lack equal opportunity to participate in the governmental decision-making process. They are to be equal partners in the nation-building and political development.

Political democracy requires at least a minimum of people's participation in the decision making process.

Citizens' participation in political affairs is important because a situation which results in high participation by members of a group normally has higher potential for democracy.<sup>11</sup> Norman D. Palmer defines political participation as the involvement of citizens in such political activities, which directly or indirectly influence the behavior and actions of decision makers. It may be viewed as any Voluntary action, successful or unsuccessful, organized or unorganized, episodic or continuous, employing legitimate or illegitimate methods, intended to influence the choice of public policies, the administration of public affairs, or the choices of political leaders at any level of government, local or national.

It may be pointed out that all citizens do not participate equally or in the same manner in any political process. The political culture of a society greatly influences the nature of political participation of individuals. The real purpose and impact of participation is to make the citizen not a passive spectator but an agent in politics, to enable him to show his disagreement as much as to endorse what is proposed, as much to scotch Initiatives as to launch them, as much to revise, criticize and block as to push, prod and hasten.<sup>12</sup> However, if political participation is to have any concrete meaning, particularly in a democratic setup, people should directly or indirectly take part in the decision-making processes which affect their day to day life.

### **Variables of Political Participation**

Political participation appears to be a complex phenomenon, a dependent variable that hinges upon many factors such as the psychological, socio-economic and political, which provide orientation to individuals either positively or negatively

### **Psychological Environment**

Political participation tends to meet one's psychological needs of overcoming loneliness. It refers to the degree to which citizens are interested in and concerned about politics and public affairs. Psychological attachment of a person towards political objects certainly determines the extent and gravity of political participation.

In every society there are persons who are very much concerned and interested in political affairs and at the same time there are persons who have no such concern and interest in political affairs. This difference may be due to the differences in their psychological attitudes. In this situation it becomes clear that the former are more likely to be active in politics than the latter. Again it is generally believed that men are psychologically more involved than women in politics as in their respective field of activity.

### **Socio-economic Environment**

The socio-economic environment will have a direct impact upon political Participation. Socio-economic variables include education, occupation, income, age, caste, religion, sex, family background, residence etc. "Political participation", says Robert Lane, "Is a function of age, sex, education and status Thus generally, participation tends to be higher among better educated, members of higher occupational and income groups, middle aged, dominant ethnic and religious groups, people with political family background, settled residents, urban dwellers and members of voluntary associations. However, the correlation between political participation and some of these socio-economic variables may vary from culture to culture in different political contexts and their effect on political participation may not be stable.

### **Political Environment**

The overall political environments do influence the entire process of political participation to a great extent. The political environment refers to the nature of the party system, the electoral system, the means of propaganda and campaign, the extent of modernization and urbanization, the influence of ideology the general awareness of the people etc.

The political party is the most potent instrument in facilitating political participation. The party resembles the nation both in its symbolic force and in its capacity for arousing affection, devotion and sacrifice on the part of its members and sympathizers. The party also inspires its members to develop a feeling of belongingness. It has been observed that people, who affiliated to a party vote more frequently than those who are not. Strongly attached members are more active in political discussions and work.<sup>13</sup>

The propaganda and election campaign refer to the efforts made by political Parties to involve the voters in the process of political participation. The campaign has its effect on polarizing party attachments, reinforcing candidate preferences and gaining votes. It is, in fact, a process of political education. A significant aspect of the relation of the individual to his political environment is his exposure to the influence of propaganda.

Political participation is the hallmark of democracy and modernization. In the traditional society government and politics are concerns of a narrow elite." There is positive relationship between urban residence and higher levels of political participation. It has been argued that urbanization, combined with other component process of social modernization, would bind the citizens with new ties to the nation state and increase the extent of political communication that leads to greater political awareness.<sup>14</sup>

Ideology can affect political participation, positively or negatively. Normally, those who have firm faith in democratic ideology positively respond to political participation. On the other hand, persons having contempt for democratic ideology show little inclination for political participation.

Political participation is associated with political awareness i.e., actual knowledge of political affairs. Awareness is highly connected with interest. In every society the number of citizens who can be described as 'aware' is extremely small. Awareness affects both the quality and amount of participation.

It is to be noted that the three sets of variables are closely linked and intermingled. A change in any one of them, can, therefore, increase or decrease the level of political participation.

### Women and Political Participation

The present study is concerned not with political participation in general, but it is only a micro-level study concerned with political participation of women that too at the grassroots levels of political functioning. Participation of women in Panchayati Raj institutions has been an area of much interest in India. Participation in the local government institutions has been viewed as essential in promoting women's consciousness and development at the local level as well as in training them for participation in the wider politics.

Democratic thinkers have generally linked liberty to the people by the process of political participation. Participation is maximized in local government because, "local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they put it within people's reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it Karl Marx stood in favor of mass involvement in the process. To him political participation by the masses is at once a process of education and of building up of a capacity for governing the new society. It is a fact that woman herself is an important variable capable of determining the nature and scope of political participation and as a result the whole political system in turn.

The attempt to assess and evaluate the level and extent of political participation of women become very much relevant as to the nature and functioning of the political systems as a whole. It is particularly more beneficial to political parties and political leaders due to the natural qualities of women such as honesty, affection and sense of duty. The mobilization of women in large numbers weakened the bondage of tradition and encouraged them to develop a perspective on the wider socio-political problems.

The political participation or the political behavior of human beings just like any other aspects of human behavior takes place in a given socio-cultural setting. It implies that the political participation is affected by social structure, economic development and historical factors joining together. The political behavior of Muslim women should be understood in the Islamic perspective. It is observed that Islam has given equal status in matters of religion and religious observations to men and women but politically they are unequal. Marcia Lee believes that, lack of female participation in politics stems from three factors, namely, children at home, fear of sex discrimination and perceptions of women that certain things are not proper to do.<sup>15</sup>

### Constraints for low political participations of women:

1. The issue of training has become an increasing concern with preparing women for the role of leadership.
2. Family also plays a significant role in women's participation in government. Familial influence can be a barrier or a support system for female elected officials in terms of connections. Family connections can help women seek elected positions at both the national and local government level.
3. There has been concern over the role of women as proxies for male family members, but women may still have important effects on policy decisions.
4. The effect of reservation for women has been increase in the number of public goods, including water and roads. Drinking water and road improvements are issues that are most frequently raised by female elected officials. Women are also likely to bring welfare issues such as violence against women, childcare, and maternal health to consideration.
5. The under-representation of women in the Lok Sabha, and from crucial decision-making positions such as in the Cabinet, are pointers of their systematic exclusion from the political structure and the deeply embedded gender bias in Indian society. Though women head a significant number of national and state-level political parties, the overall representation of women within the rank and file of these parties is dismal.
6. Women rarely play any role in formulating policies and strategies in political parties and are at best assigned the job of keeping an eye on women's issues and mobilizing them if need be for electoral benefits for their parties.

### Conclusion

The representation ratio of women in assembly election is need of more number of women representations in