WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION :
ITS STRATEGIC AND CHALLENGING
ASPECTS ON LITERATURE AND SOCIETY
সাহিত্য ও সমাজের প্রতিকূলতার আখ্যানে নারী ভুবনের উত্তরণের কথন

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Women Emancipation: Gender, Governance and Grass root Politics of India

Swati Bhattacharya

Abstract : *The convergence of the theoretical foundations of broad paradigms of gender, governance and politics has been a recent and interesting trend of research in social science. This paper is an extremely specific and brief analysis of the convergence of the three paradigms, contextualized against the post reservation period and participation of the women at the panchayat levels in rural India.*

Key words: Gender, Politics, *Panchayat*

Empowerment is nothing if not power, hence fiercely political issue
– Jo Rowlands

'It arose - that from the earliest tunilight of human society, every women was found in a state of Wondago to some man over in 2012 India had the minimal percentage of 10.9%, higher only to countries like Hungary (8.8%) Brazil (9.6%), China (9.1%) & Malaysia (9.8%)

"I like the term empowerment because nobody has defined it clearly yet; so it gives us a space to work it out in aetion terms before we have to pin ourselves down to what it means."

The discussions on the emancipation of women through their participation in the process of governance and politics seem elusive. India, primarily took up the issue of engendering their process of governance and inclusive politics only by starting the process under

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international pressure since the 1970s. In India the status report by the Committee for Status of Women in India (CSWI) titled 'Towards Equality' (1974) came as a shock to women who realized even after twenty-seven years of Independence, not only they were performing the traditional roles expected of them by men, but social factors like illiteracy, poor health, unemployment had restricted them to definite small sphere marginalizing them as non-players in the spheres of decision-making, be it in family or in society. This report stood out as a landmark as women did not realize they are not a part ofthe state and political participation until then and their need to be a part of the process was also felt largely, as their exclusion was not exposed so much before the report had come out. Most research is conducted under the subhead of gender, whether gender is equated with politics, governance, cultural or rights, equate the study of gender with the study of women. The specific usage of the term reflects the recognition by scholars and activists alike, that societies construct elaborate ideas on both descriptive and normative grounds of both men and women and their proper place in the society. Gender is a basic organizing principle of society that shapes how people have to think about ourselves. The construction of 'femaleness' is mostly shaped by social expectations and norms which puts the system of constraints and prohibitions and instills the decorum of right and wrong without and consideration for their habitual nature or biological capabilities as humans. This broadly shapes as a consequence their own self conceptions, aspirations and opportunities. From here their performance or involvement in any occupation or their roles can be traced as this construction of their identities happen from their very birth. Amrita Basu puts it as "a study of gendered governance is a study of men and masculinity as much as it is a study of women and feminity".[1]

Althought this is a focused study of women in governance, their lives operate very much within the system of gendered understanding and gendered power relations as a whole. For any social science research at present, acknowledging 'gender' and its implicaations has become formulaic in policy articulation and execution.[2] It pertains to a range of issues at all levels. Acknowledgement has become even more compulsive after gender inequality issues has become the target of addressing by all international, national bodies who have become more conscious in

addressing the issues of needs and views or demands of female citizens. When the issue of gender sensitization gains relevance the immediate target in any matter relating to policy involves the relationship of gender and the state. The state, bureaucracy, community, civil society and family together act as the threads which inter-connectedly affect the women and her involvement in all these spheres as an equal or unequal member. It has been realized earlier thaat exclusion of any one gender from the process of governance, power relationship creates a weak state but this exclusion of women from public sphere, governance or politics has been a global syndrome. The idea of Amartya Sen on defining exclusion of women from the state activities as 'mission women' also branches from the oddly paradoxical relation between politics and gender.[3] When it comes to talking about governance in India, the primary unit of governance is the rural and urban -the basic level of governance, which is the Panchayats and the Municipalities. The panchayats are one of the closest feaatures, central to ancient India; the informal presence of local administrative unit has been utilized by the British for their own benefit of playing divisive politics by playing the caste and communal card, taken up by India in different shapes and models from time to time. Gandhiji endorsed of village Swaraj and Panchayats as the main administrative units of self-sufficient villages as strength of India, whereas Ambedkar opposed of it by tagging the panchayats as heavily backward and stalwarts in practicing caste-ism and communalism. It was not until 1980s and submission of Balwant Rai and Ashok Mehta committee reports, that India could see a revival of the Panchayats. One feature was constant, throughout that India women were always off the radar in political participation. Be it participation or even less when it came to leadership or in decision making roles, the staunch division of public and private spheres ruled their lives with strictest orthodoxy. Politics was always projected as 'dirty' sphere and a customized male domain, where men are biologically more capable of performing. In 1993, with the 73rd and 74th amendment in Indian constitution, provisions were made for thirty three percent reservation of women in the local level administrative and political seats. The reservation came as a serious authentic step and the presence at the local could be ensured, at least numerically. The 73rd and 74th amendment facilitated not only the entry of women into the periphery of grass root politics in India, but

it also was an voluntary effort to revitalize local democracy and decentralize administration and make the rural politics/administration more inclusive, where social stigmas could be fought not with the traditional exclusive 'top-down' measure.

Although the entire tree key-words-emancipation, participation and governance have many strong theoretical foundations, it cannot be elaborated in a peper. To converge the essence of the three concepts, where engendering the governance came up as a key prerogative in the mid-70s, many efforts were made across the world, including in India to involve women not in important decision making roles and most importantly in politics and policy framing. Participation also involves a large theoretical paradigm. But when it comes to political participation, the word concept is synonymous to the idea of power. The political participation of women will therefore have to involve and combine a few components such as a) the extent, level and nature of women's participation in political processes by way of both formal and informal institutions; b) the impact and significance of such participation for women's rights and living conditions and c) the types of feminist issues that are raised in such participation. The inter-relationship between class, caste and gender is also considered essential in understanding the outcomes of such participation.

Although we are talking about a nation where women are eliminated at the very birth or soon after, when a girl child was born in a family. 'Dudh pilao' (give her milk) would oar the old patriarch. Dutifully and obediently some elder female members of the family would snatch the infant from her mother and drown her in a pail of milk to the rhythmic notes of cymbal to muffle her death throes. Her quivering life would be snuffed out. It could be milk, it could be opium, it could be a pillow over her little face, it could be putting a few unhusked grains of paddy in her little mouth, and it could be anything to end her cursed life. Each family had its own gharana' (tradition) of murder and followed it faith-fully. These are not horror tales from antiquity but the crude reality of India.[4] This was probably featuring largely, when Amartya Sen identified the concept of 'missing women' and India was flaunting an embarrassing sex ratio of 927 out of 1000, the issues like major exclusion, feticide, domestication was starting to get addressed all together. However the

earliest Vedic periods of the same country depicted a picture of strong equality and female dominance.[5] The creation of very carefully crafted 'myths' of strong Indian goddesses were carefully guarding a docile image of an Indian Women, lurking behind the stronger 'dev' who was her guru and she is the 'devi' also the obedient wife. "If in the pantheon of Indian icons, there were a few powerful and empowered feminine 'shaktis' like *Durga* and *Kali*, there are hundreds of androcentrist and paternalist iconic figures having sole sovereign sway. Hence the psycho-socio-politico-economic-cultural history of India teems with figuration of women as the one playing second fiddle to her lord/master. What we can fail to ignore is the way the patriarchal myth used the concept of 'shakti' prevalent in the actual mythology of Hindu religion, to establish its regime of caste, class and gender oppression. Far from bringing the 'resolution' of the women question the Indian Nationalists opened up the 'myth' of Indian womanhood as a terrain of renewed contestation. So a *Sita*, even after being literally pushed into a pyramid fire to prove her, fidelity, acquiesces to live with and for her Lord Ram only to be disowned again when she is in the family way. Hence a *Draupadi* suffers the ignominy of the polyandry thrusted upon her and plight of being pawned by one of her lords and masters to face the ultimate humiliation, a public stage-show that is onset to strip her naked in the very darbar that literally dances to the orgiastic tunes of her priggish oppressor. Yet *Laxmi* and *Sita* are not unitary selves. Both of them are schizoid personalities."[6]

This talking about myths become more relevant when it comes to a social setting of rural India, the land where the caste and communal settings are most deeply ingrained, the societal paradigms are more or less stagnant, myths are treated as laws. Bishakha Dutta pointed out an interesting aspect. When she went to record the interview of a local EWR, she said that the moment the proposal was sent to her, she was asked by her husband "then who will make the chapatis?"[7] she named the book after this, but the striking point is the comment sends out many social messages. The panchayats gives out the most vivid picture of the ground reality of India. It is more or less involving the entire grassroots. In other words Indian women have to grapple with 'feminization of poverty' and the concomitant 'backwardness'. The way Indian women

d show their presence in the political and administrative process of
renewed the energies to ta large extent. Women came out of their
holds (not omitting but balancing both) and took active interest in
ics. Although the statistics shows that the leading states like West
gal, Karnaataka or Kerala are still touching the threshold percentage
pecified by the constitution (35.6, 38.8 and 42.40% seats) 1995[8], but
is a steep rise from the 0 to 1.5 percentages as could not be found
r to the reservation. Many research and field surveys done by
archers and organizations showed that women holding the offices
helping them to fight the domestic suppressions and oppressions at
y levels. The women carefully act on developmental policies like
resistance to child-marriage, ensuring the social security and
cation schemes, which they feel are powerful empowering mediums
he masses. They are still fighting the battles of 'tokenism' and holding
office officially but the offices are run by their male counterparts in
ity. The journey towards this huge change was slow and the mandatory
tion of these reservations meant that the incumbent is left looking
a new seat was not realized in the early stages. The 1984,
iamentary elections the assassination of Indira Gandhi, women voters
e out in large numbers. The country which counts most on the vote-
k politics realized that this factor had a heavy contribution towards
iv Gandhi's electoral success and women vote bank was given
ificance importance since then.

As noted earlier that the realities about Indian women are greatly
ered by carefully constructed myths. The women's restriction to the
nestic thresholds were covered up by many myths and one of them
primarily the men promoting the disinterest of women in politics as
netic' or opinionated women being tagged as 'non-feminine'. The
ervations could create an ambience of helplessness among the men
those who participated were tagged as 'well-off' or seating in the
ts of their male counter-parts, who could not participate due to
ervation. But many research data showed that the economically
ckward women were spontaneous in participating and that included a
of younger women too. India also shows a picture in multiple
earches and surveys were women voluntary interest and they were
the replacements of their male counterparts but working in full support

from the family. Had that not been the case the central government would not have proposed to move the reservaation to 50 percent. The center has not acted on it yet, but states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan has increased it to 50%, with state amendment.

However sadly, women are getting the constitutional protection but not mass or societal protection. It might need a few more years to turn the picture around. Most women who are working effectively are serving a term with a lot of expertise and efficiency but they are replaced in the next term, with justifications like others should be given a chance. Their male peers do not go through the same. They are restricted to the reserved seats, and other seats where they are not reserved, even most efficient women are not allowed to contest. The mass do not constitute of women but men, hence the pressure is still large. So the picture after more than 10 years of reservation is that of more of toleration than acceptance. One of the biggest drawbacks was rotation. The compulsory rotation which was idealized in order to make the process uniform, especially in chairperson posts actually does not allow them to go back again. At this point, since the reservation is still making its impact, the policy can be considered as a positive push, which has created the necessary stir which was required in the society. It has acted as the most positive reinforcement to take the women out of their specified and forced domestic periphery and nurture their choice and independence and act as sound and respectable policy makers and administrataors. The women are forming that 'critical mass' which was carefully kept away by the male population to practice free hand patriarchy. As a result the female potential was missing from the politics of India, at large. The change which was conceptualized was from quantitative to qualitative and India is going through that transition.

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