

Political Participation and Representation of Women in Sikkim: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract—*Women's pathway into politics is not easy. There is no shortage of women's activity in civil society and community but there are very few women who really get into politics and be effective in influencing policy. There are social, political, cultural and institutional setup act as stumbling blocks which prevent women from climbing political ladder. In this context it becomes pertinent to examine and analyse political participation and representation of women on the basis of experiences derived from the field. In the present study 84 elected women were interviewed from four districts of Sikkim. The selection of respondents from all four districts of Sikkim was based on simple random sampling and partially on judgement sampling given the availability of the respondents, access to the respondents and willingness to the respondents to be interviewed.*

Keywords: *Elected, Women, Political Participation and Representation.*

Introduction

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts 1992 which provide 33 percent reservation of seats for women has served as a major breakthrough towards ensuring women's equal access and increased participation in local government. These enabled one million women to occupy positions as members and chairpersons of grass roots democratic institutions in India. In pursuance with Central Act of 1992, the Sikkim Panchayat Raj Act was enacted in 1993 which gave effect to reservation of seats for women in all levels of rural local bodies in Sikkim. The Sikkim Panchayat Act has been amended by Sikkim Panchayat Act 2011 which mandates not less than half of the total number of seats for women. The Sikkim Municipality Act 2007 was enacted in consonance with the provision of 74th Amendment Act 1992 which gives effect to 33 percent reservation of seats for women in urban local bodies. The reservation for women in urban local bodies increased further to 50 percent by Sikkim Municipality Act 2015. As a result, large number of women enters into governing bodies. At present there are 495 women occupied positions as members and chairpersons at all levels of rural local bodies. While in urban local bodies 28 women have make their entry as members and chairpersons.

Methodology

The present study is a combination of both descriptive and diagnostic. It is descriptive as it seeks to describe the political participation of women in the state of Sikkim. The study is diagnostic as it aims to diagnose the forces or factors which tend to act as a barrier and hinder the political participation of women in Sikkim. In the present study 84 elected women representatives were interviewed from four districts of Sikkim. The selection of respondents from all four districts of Sikkim was based on simple random sampling and partially on judgement sampling given the availability of the respondents, access to the respondents and willingness to the respondents to be interviewed.

Socio-economic profile of Elected Women Representatives

The socio-economic status like place of birth, age, sex, education, religion, income, caste, marital status and family seem to have a crucial effect on their access to resources needed for performing their roles as representatives in governmental bodies. The studies conducted in several parts of India revealed that a majority of women representatives were from lower socio-economic strata (Buch, 2000). The percentage of women from lower incomes and education is lower at the leadership levels (Mohantay and Seldon, 2003, Buch, 2000, Rai et al., 2006). Sikkim is no exception. The elected women representatives interviewed for the present study come from mixed socio-economic background like age, caste, education, occupation, religion, income, place of birth, marital status and family size. As far as place of birth is concerned 88 percent of women representatives were from rural areas and majority (27 percent) of them were house makers. As many as 51 percent of women representatives belong to the age group of 31-40 years. Majority of representatives were Scheduled Tribes (51 percent) followed by Other Backward Classes (31 percent). As per education level is concerned majority (44 percent) of representatives have education up to primary level. 48 percent profess Buddhism as their religion, followed by Hindu (37 percent) and Christian (15 percent). Majority of representatives were from lower income group as 76 percent have monthly income

below 20,000. As many as 80 percent women representatives were married.

Political Profile of Elected Women Representatives

The entry of those women whose family members particularly male members are in politics is one of the significant features of women's participation in politics in India. It is argued that women in politics are generally motivated by the male members of the family. In the present study it was found that although most (39 percent) of the women representatives have recorded no family member who are politically affiliated but substantial numbers (around 37 percent) have recorded that their male relatives (father/husband/brother) are actively involved in politics. The study revealed that women representatives carried forward the political traditions set up by their male members. One of the representatives has mentioned that she was given party ticket due to the fact that her father is the long term supporter of party.

Another important factor which provides women with certain expertise of social service is by being the member of association/organization. Women representatives were also active member of one or other organizations (social, religious, women, cultural, developmental and youth). It is said that one's route to political leadership has been that of social service. The study found that around 80 percent of women representatives were actively involved in organization. Of them majority were the member of development organization such as Self Help Groups. As far as experience of working as a member of organization is concerned majority (46 percent) of them have up to 5 years of experience.

Besides member of organization, women representatives were also an active member of political party. Having been an active member of party, it made their route of entry into politics easier. It is revealed that 68 percent of women representatives were affiliated to political party before contesting elections. However, it was also found that a substantial percent were new to political office as 32 percent of representative recorded that they have never been the member of political party before contesting election. Among those who were the member of political party a substantial percent (24 percent) of women representatives were dedicated member of party having membership period of 21-25 years.

There are various reasons to join political party ranging from influence of ideology to family background. For women reasons are numerous for not to join parties. Similarly, the reasons are numerous for women to be affiliated to political parties. As identified by the women representatives' majority that is 54.8 percent were motivated by party ideology. However, it is interesting to note that family background of the representatives stood second most (around 18 percent) important reasons for joining political parties.

Making entry to politics is a difficult job for women but even more difficult is making their way to the top leadership of the party positions. Sultana hold that women had to strive a lot for

achieving leadership position in the party due to patriarchal nature of political parties and the society at large (Sultana, 2015). It is even more difficult for women who wanted to build their political careers on their own without having support of family and others. The study revealed that only 13 percent of women representatives were able to hold position as main office bearers. Majority remained as an ordinary member of the party. As far as representative's involvement in party activities is concerned maximum percent (61 percent) were the ground level workers, they mobilize the people towards the goals of party ideology.

No matter what difficulties women had undergone they were always encouraged and motivated either by their family members or by their own instinct for social service. Hence they managed to break the glass ceiling and enter politics. They have managed to come out of four walls and have become leaders. The present study found that majority (33 percent) of women representatives were house makers, 16 percent were business women and 14 percent were farmers prior to holding present position.

Women's pathways into politics

Political recruitment is the pathways whereby new members are recruited into the government decision making bodies. Political recruitment is influenced by various factors such as individual's social background, socialization, personal traits, political ambitions and the opportunity structures within which their career advances. However, recruitment of women in political office influenced by various social, cultural, economic and structural factors.

Krikpatrick note that though the number of men who seek public office is very small, but the number of women is much smaller (Krikpatrick, 1974). He classified women recruits into office seekers and ready recruits. She holds that office seekers are those individuals who took the initiative to run political office and ready recruits are those individuals who waited to be asked. The present study revealed that 85 percent of women representatives belong to the category of ready recruits. Women representatives of this category stated that they did not take any initiatives to be recruited as a candidate. It was revealed that majority of women representatives got entry in to politics due to reservation policy and they were asked by party members to filled women candidates for the election. 16 percent of women representatives were office seekers. In this category women were either from strong political background or herself were long term party workers who wanted to be represented in political office.

Reflecting on obstacles faced by women in political recruitment, Krikpartick argues, women are oppressed and barred from power by a ruling class i.e. men of the world (Krikpatrick, 1974). The major obstacle in women's political recruitment was mainly due to the existing role system which was devised by men for maintaining their hegemony (Krikpatrick, 1974). The conventional roles devised for

women are considered incompatible to political office. The study found that though majority of women representative were supported by male party members, there are substantial percent of people who are suspicious of women's credibility to run public office. Some women representatives have also recorded the problem of character assassination they had to face in politics.

Contesting the Election

Contesting an election is another difficult task for women; it requires great effort, motivation and courage from the part of contestant. It is said that women are motivated less than men to enter politics. In India participation of women as contestants is less than that of men. The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution have served as a major breakthrough towards ensuring increased participation of women in politics. These constitutional amendments provide 33 percent seats reservation for women in local bodies. As a result large numbers of women enter politics. The study revealed that 42 percent of women representatives contested for election due to reservation of seats. 58 percent of women representatives contested for the first time. It is observed that vast majority of women were very new to politics and were motivated mainly by the reservation policy of government. Besides reservation, substantial percent (38 percent) were motivated by social service consideration. This study confirms the findings of Krikpatrick that the majority of women enter into politics with social serving consideration.

Another major obstacle in the way of women contesting election is money. The process of election has become a very costly affair. The election expenses are very high despite of ceilings imposed by the Election Commission on election expenditure. This create harder situation particularly for women to make an arrangement for election expenses. It is very difficult for women to raise funds; usually they meet their election expenses from personal resources raise from family and friends. As much as 52 percent of representatives pointed out that their major source of election expenses was personal contribution.

Role and Performance of Women Representatives

Sultana mentioned that role perception and performance is the significant yardstick to assess the efficiency of political leaders (Sultana, 2015). The role of representatives or political leaders is important for bringing social, economic and political changes. This can be possible only when the representatives realize responsibilities as a public leader. Present study found that once the women representatives enter into governing bodies they were actively performing their duties. They were aware of people's problem at the ground level and channelize the issues to top level so that it can be properly mitigated. Their main concern was to make work easier for the constituents. They apprised issues related to development, employment, health, alcoholism and drug addiction, land and atrocities on women.

Though majority (66 percent) of women representatives stated they were being visited by people occasionally, a substantial percent (33 percent) recorded frequent visitors. Among the visitors majority demands grants from government schemes. Besides grants people also visited them with problems related to job. Other grievances people brought to them were developmental works, property disputes, water problems and gender-based violence. The women representatives were not only well aware of people's problems but they also proved their abilities by solving the problems by their own capacity. As much as 48 percent were fully confident of their ability to solve problems while 42 percent finds the remedy by taking helps from others like their fellow mates and higher officials. Some of the representatives (11 percent) also explained about their dependency on male members.

Perceptions of Women Representatives on Political Participation of Women

It has been observed that the way women works or deals with the situation are different from men. Women representatives have different approach toward public problems and adopt different methods to solve it. In the present study though substantial percent (38 percent) have recorded no difference between men and women representatives, majority recorded difference between them. 17 percent viewed women are more honest and dedicated to their work as compared to men. 37 percent of women representatives said that women are more receptive to people's problems. They often are prompt to deal with the problems brought up by the people while men representatives keep it for pending for another days.

After being elected to governmental bodies whether women representatives act for women's interest has been the major point of debate. It is believed that women representatives will raise the women issues in the assemblies and thereby help in decision making from women perspectives. The issues related to welfare, health and upbringing of children: issues include reproductive rights, violence against women, rape, sexual exploitation and prostitution. The present study confirms this observation as majority (36 percent) of women representatives Strongly Agree and another 28 percent Agree. The women representatives viewed that only women can address the problem of women. However, it is significant to note that substantial percent expressed disagreement with the view and stated that both men and women are equally concerned of women issues.

Though women representatives were able to prove their capabilities by effectively participating in policy making bodies, it has been observed that they encountered some crucial problems while performing their duties. On the basis of responses, it was found that majority of women representatives had problems emerged due to lack of knowledge and expertise to deal with the situation. Another major problem recorded was physical constraints. This includes responsibilities relating to reproductive, child care, domestic roles, towards family, marriage etc. These

responsibilities of women representatives hinder their role of policy makers. The problem of role conflict has been recorded by the majority (52 percent) of women representatives.

It must also be mentioned that the women representatives lamented the socio-cultural barriers on women political participation. Socio-cultural barriers particularly the gender roles thereby women are kept away from actively participating in politics. Those who managed to break the glass ceiling and enter politics have to work hard to make position equal to men. As many as 7 percent recorded people are suspicious of credibility of women.

Conclusion

The reservation of seats for women at all levels of local government is noteworthy. However, there still a long way ahead to attain political empowerment of women. Making entry to politics is a difficult job for women but even more difficult is making their way to the top leadership of the party positions. The socio-cultural practices which perpetuate the patriarchal norms of the society hinder the participation of women. Notwithstanding the obstacles in their path, women have proved their capabilities by effectively participating and making differences in various levels of decision making bodies.

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