



## WOMEN LEADERSHIP: AN IMPERATIVE FOR GENDER PARITY

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### ABSTRACT

*Though our constitution and electoral system give ample scope for women to rise to the top at the centre and states, very few manage to reach at the top. From the 1980's onwards, women's status in the developing countries have centered on the question of inequalities in power, where sharing in leadership remains a major issue. Leaders have a considerable power to lead the public opinion, so they play a crucial role in the functioning and change of any society. Women leadership assumes significance as it has the potential to challenge existing notions of power and the concept of representation and leadership. As leader, women become a part of the process through which an issue is taken up in a way that it receives attention from the government. It is only in the 21st century that the developed country like America is set out to vote for its first women as a presidential candidate, the history has already been created in a developing country like India, decades ago. Along with women Prime Minister, it has women Lok Sabha speakers, Chief Ministers and President. Often, the rise of women in top positions in politics is attributed to the men around them. But the question arises can they consolidate their position if they don't have that potential, political acumen, determinism etc, needed to survive in politics. Only those women can stay longer in politics that are adept in the language and methods of negotiations and power-brokering. In the contemporary period, literacy, mass movements, 73rd and 74th Amendments, media exposure have provided a fertile ground for women leaders to prove their potential in politics. In this paper, focus would be to know the extent, to which women leaders, whatever their number may be, raise issues specifically relating to the gendered concerns of women. Without raising women's rights agenda in the governmental fora assertively, gender equality cannot be assured. Women empowerment can't be achieved without the full cooperation of men, so the need of the hour is to act in unison.*



**Key Words :** Leadership, Representation, gender parity, Empowerment, Electoral Politics

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women got the legal right to participate in politics the world over; they are making inroads in the political decision making, but the presence of substantial number of women in active politics still remain grim. There has been consistent and concerted demand for women to be included in councils of power and political forums to give space to women's leadership. Even the Promises were given by the world leaders at the historic UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing to nominate more women to senior UN posts with the expectation that without women getting equal access to positions of decisions making, gender equality, global security and peace will never be realized. Unfortunately, the situation has not improved significantly even after Beijing+20. In the past decade women have filled less than a quarter of senior positions in the organization. It is only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the developed country like America is set out to vote for its first woman as a presidential candidate, the history has already been created in a developing country like India, decades ago. Indian women got the unrestricted right to vote and stand for public office right from its independence where the women from the developed countries of the world had to wage a long struggle to get their basic right to vote. Our constitution and electoral system give ample scope for women to rise to the top at the centre and the states. In the process of granting equal status and equal rights to women, our constitutional provisions laid the basis for equal participation at each political level beginning from exercising the right to vote to holding highest political office. Lakshmi Lingam rightly pointed out that the Indian state provided 'space for negotiating rights and privileges' (Lingam, 2002: 310-334)

A total of 62 women members of parliament (MP) are a part of the 16th Lok Sabha, taking the proportion of women MP up to 11 per cent. While this is the highest percentage of women MP since Independence, India is still far behind the global average of 24 per cent or even South Asian average of 18 per cent when it comes to sending elected women political representatives to the Parliament. The sharing of political power and space is one of the important dimensions of various facets of women empowerment in the democratic settings. People, whether men or women, have the right to participate in deciding their common goals. It is only social democracy that has the potential to give voice to the



voiceless and pave the way for the transition from the subject to the agent to thee people. From the 1980's onwards, women's status in the developing countries have centered on the question of inequalities in power, where the representation of women in politics and their share in power remains a major issue. It was realized that gender parity in the political processes is must which can be attained by increasing presence of women in the political processes, but the real challenge was how to make women's interests a part of policy discourse by paving the way for them to set an agenda for change. The demand for increase in the representation of women in electoral politics is not only to ensure the physical presence of women in the political sphere but also counter the dominant political culture rife with sexism and hyper masculinity. It was felt that without making efforts in this direction, rightful share of women representation could not be ensured and women continue to remain invisible in the power structure of the society.

Leaders have a considerable power to lead the public opinion, so they play a crucial role in the functioning and change of any society. Women leadership assumes significance as it has the potential to challenge existing notions of power and the concept of representation and leadership. Women in power can be a source of inspiration to other women and their active participation can positively impact governance. As leader, women become a part of the process through which an issue is taken up in a way that it receives attention from the government. Linking the leadership to power, Devaki Jain, elaborated; "... feminist claims on the political arena are not just to share power, but to change the nature of power; not just to govern but to change the nature of governance. Women have many ways of enhancing, transforming and expanding the notion of power and policies, and giving full meaning to the concept of representation and leadership." [Omita Goyal, 2005,p.

Though it is difficult for women to enter and built career in politics, yet in the contemporary period, literacy, mass movements, Constitutional Amendments, media exposure have provided a fertile ground for women to enter in politics as leaders. The initiation of engendering rural and urban governance by the constitutional amendments of 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act has generated lot of excitement and expectations and Women Panchayat leaders are seen to play a more development oriented role. But despite that, in the highest political institutions still their significant presence remains negligible. The



role of women leaders in Indian politics exhibited a very paradoxical situation. On the one hand there have been women, although very few, who manage to reach at the top political positions. They made their presence felt at the national and international sphere, having strong personalities and provided good governance and created a niche for themselves in politics, the so-called domain of men. On the other hand, the presence of women in the party and government decision making bodies continues to be abysmally low. A few women leaders manage to reach at the nerve centre of power despite being confronted in myriad ways changed the political discourse in their own unique style.

The number of women leaders in political parties is also dismal as the political parties are reluctant to give tickets to women. This is despite the fact that five political parties are headed by women: oldest party congress by Sonia Gandhi, the Bhahujan Samaj Party by Mayawati, the Trinamool Congress Party by Mamta Banerjee; and the All India Anna Dravida Munetra Kazhagam by Jayalalithaa, and the People's Democratic party by Mehbooba Mufti. The ruling party Bhartiya Janta Party has also a number of fiery women leaders as Sushma Swaraj, Uma Bharti, Vasudharaje Sindhiya, Smiriti Irani, Menaka Gandhi and Nirmala Seetharaman, etc , but unfortunately the number of seats parties offers to its women is low. Political parties have setup women's wings that have appropriated women without giving them much space in the higher echelons. Women MP's are disproportionately educated, articulated and affluent as compared to the general female population. Despite the fact that these women experience more constraints than men in gaining power, it has been observed that they have demonstrated extraordinary ambition and skill in acquiring the power they achieved. In the 16th Lok Sabha, 62 women have been able to reach the lower house. Among these women, more than 90% women are having graduate, post graduate and professional degrees. Majority of them don't have criminal cases against them. About 90% of them have assets worth more than crore. But Indian politics reveal exclusionary trends in providing space to women especially as leaders until and unless political compulsions demand <sup>1</sup>.

Another Paradoxical situation exhibited when on the one hand there is an emergence of strong women leaders who are assertive and have full control over the party and on the other a younger generation of educated and capable wives and daughters are



entering political parties which are under the control of a patriarchal figure. Some examples are of Samajwadi Party, Akali Dal, Nationalist Congress Party and the DMK etc. in which wives and daughters are contended to play a subordinate role. Since 1980's, a number of developments have introduced some changes. Democratization and rising levels of politicization, particularly in the Hindi heartland, improved literacy levels, decline of the congress party and the emergence of regional, backward caste and Dalit based parties and improved levels of growth rates in some states have provided new avenues to women.

Often, the rise of women in top positions in politics is attributed to the men around them. It is argued that it is the result of the pathway laid by fathers, husbands or other male figures. But the question arises, can they consolidate their position if they don't have that potential, political acumen, determinism etc, needed to survive in politics. Only those women can stay longer in politics that are adept in the language and methods of negotiations and power-brokering. Here I would substantiate my argument by giving examples of women who though inducted in politics through their male relationship yet made their own space. The rise and success of Jayalalithaa, a former film actress is a complicated story. Her association with popular hero MGR enabled her to become leader of the AIADMK but her interest and hard work in politics made her the Chief Minister many a times. She has been described as beautiful women, ruthless and authoritarian leader and an able administrator. Beginning with a difficult apprenticeship under MGR, when she learned to survive in a largely male political arena, she successfully competed with V. Janaki, the widow of MGR for control of the AIADMK and has withstood attempts by DMK Patriarch Karunanidhi and his party men to malign her image and misbehave with her in the Assembly. Popularly known as Amma [mother] she has worked hard using an elaborate system of patronage and established herself as an independent leader. Despite corruption charges and an opulent lifestyle she is equated with a modern day Tamiltay a uniquely Tamil ideal, which appeals to both men and women combining the varied attributes of mother, desirable women, virginal goddess while personifying the Tamil language itself. [sudha pai,114-15]

Another example of a strong women leader is of Mayawati, former chief minister of UP. Despite being a Dalit, her emergence at the top position is not only an indication of



deepening of our democratic structure but also changed the political inheritance centered on high caste male leadership. Selected and mentored by Kanshi Ram when he brought her into the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees' Federation in mid 1980's many felt a woman would not be able to make a space for herself in politics in a state ruled by conservative high caste patriarchs since independence. Time and again attempts were made to her life by the SP hired goons but she emerged as a stronger leader from that attempts. Although the credit for establishing BSP goes to Kanshi Ram, but building it a strong organization and achieving a majority on her own in 2007 has been her achievement only. Despite her authoritarian control over the party, the cadres respect and like her and call behenji as a mark of respect. Mayawati has emerged as a role model for Dalit women in UP, instead of rising on her Dalit oriented agenda she attempted to develop backward regions and all disadvantaged sections and that way she created a niche for her in politics. Some of the regional women leaders have also made a mark in the sphere of india's male dominated politics.

There are few women political leaders whose rise in politics due to their family background. Of these, the most prominent is Mehbooba Mufti. Mehbooba, the leader and one of the co-architects of the People's Democratic Party, though came into politics through her family background (being the daughter of Mufti Mohammed Syed, who held different political positions as the leader of Congress, including that of Home Minister of India) rose to be a leader in her own right. One of the reasons that the PDP could be successful in replacing the National Conference the main regional party in the state of J&K and forming the government after the 2002 elections, it was quite substantially due to the role played by Mehbooba Mufti. Soon after the launch of the party in 1999, she was involved in political campaign which the party termed as 'healing touch'. This was a campaign for offering a different strategy to deal with the Kashmir situation and reflected a pro-people politics. Offered at a time when the people of Kashmir were fatigued by the protracted violence and need a political respite, this policy worked out in favour of the PDP and Mehbooba Mufti became a visible face in the conflict situation, empathizing with people, raising issues on their behalf – mostly of human rights violations. It was her aggressive mobilization around the 'Healing Touch' policy that the Mufti Syed could overcome the stigma that he faced in



Kashmir due to his role in the early period of militancy, when he was the Home Minister of India. Discussing the political profile of Mehboob, Anuradha Bhasin notes,

“Mehbooba mufti ,chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir introduced a new phase in the political culture of the state, underlining the space and acceptability of a women in politics, not just a participant but as a decision maker. Mehbooba, who heads a major regional party Peoples Democratic Party may have entered active politics by fluke, winning on a congress ticket for the only reason that she happened to be mufti Mohammad Sayeed’s daughter. Later when her father floated people’s democratic Party, she broke away from the congress and joined a party that takes up the plea of human rights and favours a dialogue with all sections of the society including separatists. Mehbooba was perhaps the first mainstream politician to brought the human rights issue into the political ambit defining the Kashmir problem as not just a political one but also a human one. It is women who become central in Mehbooba’s bid to make a humanitarian issue of killing and violence political. This move helped her create a base in the valley, especially with women support, in the mid and late nineties.” (Bhasin, 2010)

Another example is of Mamta Banerjee, chief minister of West Bengal and the leader of Trinmool Congress, rose to become a recognized national and regional leader through her sheer grit and determination. She has a number of achievements to her credit she was elected five times to the Lok Sabha from South Kolkata constituency she was a youth congress leader in West Bengal she formed her own party- the TMC-which is positioned as both anti Congress and anti left, an ally of both NDA and UPA 2. Her most seminal achievement has been defeating the Communists who were in power for more than 30 years. Unorthodox women leader with huge public base and populist appeal Banerjee does not conform to public standard of feminine behavior. Her followers compare her to the Goddess Durga and a tigress for the twin qualities of female courage and intolerance of injustice which voter find rare in politicians. She does not only have a reputation of unpredictability, ruthlessness, and a volatile temper, but also a mastery of the timing of public gestures, the manipulations of public sentiment, sycophantic loyalty from followers and complete control over the party.





Despite the presence of these women in powerful positions, chauvinism exists in Indian politics and the sexist remarks are normal. In the course of debate on the shelters for the homeless, BJP legislator in Delhi Assembly is reported to have called Alka Lamba, an APP MLA, “Raat Ko Ghoomne wali”, just because she narrated the plight of homeless in the night shelters as she visited those ones while performing her duty as a committed politician of her constituency. Usually when a male politician did something wrong in politics, he is criticized on the basis of his decisions and policies but in case of women politicians, it adds her appearance. Textile Minister, Smriti Irani, made some disastrous decisions while holding HRD Ministry, but her criticism often assumes sexist overtones with reference to her physical appearance, her mannerism, her shrill voice and her past as a TV actress. Actor turned politician Jaya Prada frequently found herself at the receiving end of this sort of stereotyping of women with her Bharatnatayam recitals even discussed as an activity unbecoming of an MP in the house. Not a word was uttered like this against the cricketer and comedian turned politician Navjot Singh Sidhu or actor turned Shatrudhan Sinha. JDU’s leader Sharad Yadav made distasteful references to women from the South who are dark, have beautiful bodies and know dance. Vasanti also recalls the ugly incident in 1989 in her book: ‘Jayalalitha’s Journey from Movie Star to Political Queen’, when a DMK MLA pulled the Leader’s sari in the Legislative Assembly. Mayawati also faced the similar type of situation in 1995 which she described as the most humiliating experience of her life.

No doubt, women leaders in India have emerged as important symbols of the nation. In the absence of support from the organized movements even women in authoritative positions in politics have not been able to put women’s issues specifically relating to the gendered concerns of women in their constituencies and in general, on their agenda. Without raising women’s rights agenda in the governmental fora assertively, gender equality cannot be assured. So the need of the hour is to act in unison to counter gender stereotypes in politics and paving the way for smooth entry of women leaders and to nominate feminist women in higher positions to ensure justice and equality.

Notes and references





1. The nomination of kiran bedi as a chief ministerial candidate in the assembly election of Delhi is not due to her extensive political participation in the past; neither has she worked as a grass root worker. She has administrative experience and the image of an honest police officer. The political party tried to encash her aura of emancipated women for the electoral gains

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