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Democratic decentralisation and political participation of women in West Bengal of India: A study

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Abstract

“A Nation Would Not March Forward, If The Women Are Left Behind.” – Swami Vivekananda. Democratic decentralisation plays important role in the political participation of the citizens in the country. It makes a chance to participate in the political system of the men and women in a state and in entire India. On the other hand for the success of democratic decentralisation political participation of men and women of all communities is also essential. In this article I focus on the political participation of women in the state of West Bengal. Because we know that in this state women are not so much politically conscious because of some reasons. But their political consciousness is essential for the development of the state and nation. In this article I find out various causes for the less consciousness of women in the political participation and some remedies specially in the state of West Bengal.

Keywords: West Bengal, India, political, participation, women, decentralisation

Introduction

Political participation refers to the participation of individuals in the political process, which ensures that the individuals are able to take part in the deciding the common goals of the society and the best ways of achieving these goals. Political participation includes not merely electoral politics and activities of political parties but also other social and political movements. The concept of political participation has been popularized in Political Science by the behaviourists of course arguments in favor of greater political participation had been advanced by republican and democratic theorists from Rousseau onwards and are still in use by contemporary political theorists.

“Political participation is participation in the process of government, and the case for political participation is essentially a case for substantial number of private citizens to play a part in the process by which leaders are chosen and/or government policies are shaped and implemented.” – Birch.

The communitarians find problems with this liberal concept of participation. They argue that more important than participation in the process of government through the ‘politics of right’ is participation at community level for ‘politics of common good’. Thus political participation can be seen broadly as participation in the political life of the community or civil society with different agents. Thus we can say that the political participation of the women to be defined in broader terms, not just in terms of their participation in the electoral and administrative process. It may include support of political groups, communication with legislators, dissemination of political views and opinions among the electorate and other related activities.

The various forms of political participation are as follows

1. Voting in elections
2. Voting in referendums
3. Canvassing or otherwise campaigning in elections
4. Active membership of a political party
5. Active membership of a pressure group
6. Taking part in political demonstrations, strikes with political objectives, and similar activities aimed at changing public policy
7. Participate in various forms of civil disobedience

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8. Membership of govt. advisory committees
9. Membership of consumers' councils
10. Client involvement in the implementation of social policies
11. Taking part in various forms of community action
12. Performing social duties such as jury service and military duties
13. Village or town meetings and public debate on controversial issues
14. Participate in various forms of codetermination, such as student-faculty committees
15. Taking part in new social movements.

Democratic decentralisation means grant of authority by a superior to a subordinate. Thus democratic decentralisation is an extension of the democratic principle aims at widening the area of the people's participation, authority and autonomy through devolution of powers to people's representative organization from the top levels to lowest levels. It stands for people's right to initiate their own projects for local well-being and the power to execute and operate them in an autonomous manner. Decentralisation is a prime mechanism through which democracy becomes truly representative and responsive. G. Shabbir Cheema and Dennis A. Rondinelli have enumerated following advantages of decentralisation:

1. Tailor-made plans as per the needs of heterogeneous regions and groups are possible.
2. It can cut red-tape.
3. Closer contract between government officials and local people is possible.
4. It can allow better penetration of national policies to areas remote from national capital.
5. Capacity of local institutions and their managerial and technical skills will develop.
6. It will ensure greater representation of political, ethnic and tribal groups developmental decision-making.
7. It will ensure better co-ordination.
8. It will institutionalize the participation of the citizens and exchange of information.
9. It will offset the influence of the elite people.
10. It will lead to a more flexible, innovative and creative administration.
11. Local people can execute, monitor and evaluate better than central agencies.
12. Increased political stability can be ensured by increasing the participation of the local people in decision-making.
13. It will reduce the cost of planning and increase number of public goods.

73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, 1992

73rd Constitutional Amendment Act and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 they are the cornerstones for democratic decentralisation at grassroot level in India. By these two Acts local self-governments have been constitutionalised in India. The first initiative to institutionalize the local self-government was taken by Rajiv Gandhi. But the local self-government was constitutionalised under the prime ministership of P. V. Narasimha Rao. Today democratic decentralisation is a global phenomenon. 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, 1992 have institutionalized women's participation with men through gram sabhas and ward committees. A noteworthy feature of these amendments is an emergence of a new generation

leadership at the local levels from the women of all communities of the society.

Literature Review

Political participation of the women in West Bengal is almost negligible. Due to the causes of low level of modern higher education, confinement of Muslim women in their house, Purdah practices of Muslim women and less opportunity to interact with other of outside world the women are far behind from the political awareness in West Bengal. Education not only plays the vital role for empowerment and job opportunity but also plays the vital role for self-awareness and self-confidence about the power of decision making. Most of the women especially Muslim women have no knowledge about the political system, NGOs, social movements, political parties and the ideologies of the political parties. Although, in election they are too much involved to casting their vote without any justification the eligibility of the contesting candidates. The family decision mainly the decision of the male member of the family is considered to the final one. But the present situation is slightly different somewhere for the reservation system at the local self-government levels by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. According to these two Constitutional Amendment Acts one-third seats are reserved for women at the local self-governments. The government of West Bengal has also introduced the reservation for O.B.C in the local self-governments which is an important initiative to increase the participation rate of women of all communities in political matters.

Aims of This Study

The aim of this proposed research work seeks to establish the role of women in the political system in West Bengal and to find out the factors behind the prevailing situation of women of all in political participation in the state of West Bengal.

Objectives of This Study

The objectives of this study are as follows

1. To study the levels and patterns of women's political participation in West Bengal.
2. To study the factors determining the political participation of women.
3. To measure political interest, awareness, sense of political efficiency and political ambition of the women.
4. To study the challenges faced by the women in political participation.
5. To assess the role of political parties towards women for political participation.
6. To evaluate the role of reservation policy for OBC-A and OBC-B in West Bengal.
7. To analyze the socio-economic profile in political participation of the women.
8. To study the gender gaps in political participation.

Hypothesis

The present study has been progressed on the following hypothesis.

1. Political participation of the women is very low in comparison to that of male participation.
2. Women suffer more from the participatory conflict than men.

3. Illiteracy, lack of awareness, domestic responsibilities and economic dependence prevents women from participating in political system.
4. Political participation and political efficacy are actively associated with age, marital status, nature of family, higher level of education, occupation status, family income and with the membership of associations.
5. Panchayati Raj Institutions of local self-governments can play an essential role in promoting women's participation in the democratic process.
6. There are some problems and obstacles that women to face in the political participation in West Bengal.
7. Democratic decentralisation has led to a positive outcome in West Bengal for the Muslim women's political participation.
8. Reservation for women in the local self-governments according to the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, reservation policy of West Bengal Government for OBC-A and OBC-B also has positive impact on political participation for women.

Research Questions

The Research question in this study are as follows:

1. What are the challenges faced by women of West Bengal in the political participation?
2. What is the nature of women's political participation in West Bengal?
3. What are the factors that determine women's political participation?
4. Why there have been "gender gaps" in political participation?
5. Whether women's activeness in social and economic fields necessarily leads to higher political participation of women?

Methods of This Study

This study is an empirical study. In order to reach to the conclusion this research work will follow the historical method to find out the women's political history, comparative method to make a comparative study between the general and representative respondents, sampling method and statistical method as well as case study method to meet the grass root level of political orientation among the women. And for this interview and questionnaire method for the collection of data will be adopted accordingly. Open ended and fixed alternative question will be there as per need of response from the respondents of women in the state of West Bengal.

Significance of the Study

Democratic decentralisation has marked a new era in the history of political participation of women. Because according to the provisions 73rd and 74th Constitutional Act 33 percent seats are reserved for women at the local self-governments. So with the men the women of all communities of the society are also getting chance to participate in the political system. In the state of West Bengal now 50 percent seats are reserved for women at the local self-government levels. Which is a very positive initiative to increase the political participation rate of the women. The present study has confined to some rural and urban areas of West Bengal. So, this study will help to realize the present picture of political participation of the women of all communities and it also help to understand the importance of the democratic

decentralisation in the political participation of women in this state.

Limitations of the Study

In the study of democratic decentralisation and political participation of the women there will come some limitations. Firstly, it will be very tough to include all the women in the process of data collection. Secondly, which women are not literate they will be unable to give sufficient data in this study. Thirdly, some women may deny to give answers relating to the study for various reasons. But we can hope that my study will be accepted by the majority of people of the society and this study will help to understand the situation of women in West Bengal and it also help to realize the importance of the democratic decentralisation.

Conclusion

From this study it is noticeable that the political participation of women is developed through the democratic decentralisation. Though the level of political participation of the women in West Bengal is unsatisfactory. They participate in the political system only as a voter and few of them as a candidate in various elections. But in the others sectors of political participation their participation rate is very low. And in Central Legislature and State Legislature the reservation for women can develop the participation rate of the women of all communities. Finally, it can be said that good education system for women and especially for Muslim girls or women is very essential for the development of political participation of women and for the development of West Bengal, other states and India.

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