



Gender quota: Creating political space for Muslim women in panchayati raj institution of Manipur

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Abstract

Increasing the political space for women is generally promoted as being central to the achievement of social justice and gender equity. It is difficult to isolate the women issues from the overall social development of a nation. With the increase of women in political representation, believed that the women representatives empowered the community itself. PRIs encouraging more women to enter the political sphere by increasing women's confidence in political structure. Women enter in politics through the quota system, the argument is, how the quota system leads to affirmative action of women? Does the quota system influence more women to enter in politics? Do the women representatives create a space for recognition and redistributive of justice in politics? The article is made an attempt with these arguments by taking the case study of Muslim women in PRIs of Manipur.

Keywords: political participation, women empowerment, democratization, quota system, affirmative action, gender and politics

Introduction

The Indian Constitution has numbers of provisions for women's rights in all aspects. Articles 14, 15, 23, 29, 30, 42, 45 etc. has given equal rights for women. All democratic countries including India have incorporated the principles of liberty, fraternity and justice in their constitutions and made an attempt to put into practice. However, in reality the democratization process has remained confined to democratic institutions. The minority rights, women rights and gender equality are mainly highlight the weakness in functioning. It seems that democratic functioning is gradually declining.

The government provides constitutional provisions for minority and women to practice a politics of inclusion. The affirmative action is one of the important policies adopted in India, constitutes a set of positive antidiscrimination measures intended to ensure access for members of groups who otherwise would be excluded or underrepresented in preferred positions in a society. It increases the representation of women and minorities in the areas of employment, education and decision-making process from which they have been historically exclude. 'Reservation' policy as a measure for affirmative action, for the disadvantage section of society. Regarding this, the article is focus on women political representation and affirmative action.

In order to describe different approaches to anti-discrimination theories or laws have developed the notion of formal and substantive equality. The interpretation of the equality scheme in the constitution of India as substantive equality is in a multidimensional way. It is based on the constitutional history and the Supreme Court of India's interpretation of the principle that recognized that mere formal equality of opportunity under article 16(1) won't suitably address the exclusion of disadvantaged classes in Indian society. From this perspective, the reservation policy rooted in substantive equality and conceptualized to balance formal equality and social exclusion. A substantive approach could be conceptualized in five underlying aims

and principles of substantive equality- equality of result, equality of opportunity, dignity, social exclusion and social hierarchy. The multidimensional approach identifies recognition, redistribution, participation and transformation as the core aims of substantive equality.

Fraser works on harmonizing the conceptual faults lines between cultural disadvantage, ie recognition and economic disadvantage i.e redistribution recognizes the elemental needs for accepting the politics of both the disadvantages to furthering the justice project. 'Representation' or political participation is the third dimension of justice which is always present in recognition and redistribution. This account depicts the importance of the socio economic and cultural dichotomy in the project of social transformation and redressal of injustices face by the disadvantage groups.

Social exclusion in India and its efforts to developed an inclusive democracy in a highly diverse, multicultural, multilingual and multi religious society need to be discussed. Here, the Muslims suffer from greater deprivation and disadvantage compare to other minorities. Zoya Hasaan in her book, Politics of Inclusion: Caste Minorities and Affirmative Action, gave two major reasons for focusing on the politics of inclusion: first, the increased presence of historically excluded groups is a sign of public institutions, and this in turn is an important marker of the fairness of democratic regimes and second, greater inclusion of excluded groups in decision making institute would provide these bodies with the presence of people who can articulate the interest of these sections. The strongest rationale for representing particular social groups lies in the manner in which public institutions work- which is to say they often do not provide adequate policy concerns for groups that are marginalized and deprived. It is this exclusion that provides the strongest justification for what Anne Philips has described as 'politics of presence'. It can be seen there is an upsurge of interest in strategies of inclusion ranging from affirmative action to mandatory reservations. The proliferation of democracy in the last decade has led to the emergence of a consensus that within

democratic systems one social group should not monopolize political power or governance. This has led to an awareness that creating political systems that address the needs of various groups, especially those that are marginalized on the basis of race, religion, and ethnic background, is necessary for equity, fairness, and political stability. The article tried to examine the politics of inclusion and the presence of women in politics with the case study of Muslim women representation in Panchayati Raj Institution of Manipur.

Muslim Women in Panchayati Raj Institution of Manipur

Women comprises half of the population, they need due attention in the system and share their space in the process. In order to strengthen women section of society, participation in politics is necessary. It provides legitimacy to the system and empowered themselves. The introduction of 73rd Amendment created a scope for accomplishing development with social justice, recognition and redistribution of power in politics. Women's participation in panchayat provided an opportunity to women to participate in decision making process.

Manipuri Muslims make up 8.4% of the population and are spread across 2 districts in the hills of Churhandpur and Chandel as well as 4 districts in the Manipur valley -Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, and Bishnupur. Out of Manipur's total Muslim population of 2,39836 female Muslims are 1, 19432 according to the 2011 census. Muslim women make up almost half of Manipur's entire Muslim population. They enter in politics through the reservation system in decentralized government. They are elected with the post of Members, Pradhan and Zilla Parishad at the grassroot level. Therefore, an attempt is made to get the idea of women empowerment in the state by focusing on decision making process. For the study, needs the Muslim women aspects in social and economic conditions in the state.

Social empowerment

Muslim women are more disadvantage as compare to major community of the state. The folk seems to be inferior to male of the family or society regarding the legal status, related to marriage, divorce, maintenance and inheritance. Most of the Muslim women are unaware of their religious legal rights, and even if they are, they do not consider it important to mobilize themselves and fight for such rights which have been given to them by Shariat. It is the disadvantage position of Muslim women due to the misuse of Islamic provision regarding the social institute of marriage and divorce. Rigid patriarchy, social customs, traditional cultures like the early marriage, misuse of personal laws, restrictions on movements hindered immensely the social status of Muslim Women in Manipur.

Economic Empowerment

According 2001 population census, the shared percentage of Muslim worker to the total state workers found to be 7.42 percent. Muslim women mainly confined to the agricultural activities. They are mainly found as labour in large extent to the production of rice and vegetables. Further, the number of Muslim workers to the total Muslim population was recorded at 36.75%, while out of the total population of Manipur the percentage of worker was 43.62 at the state level. It is found that 43.62% are outside the labour force,

28.3% in the labour force of which 24.14% are employed and 4.69% are unemployed. Women are classified into three description as-engaged in economic activity, as an employed, not working but seeking for work, that is unemployed, and not working or not available for work, means those who are not in labour force. According to distribution of persons by principal using activity status, it is found that 90.12 percent of the female are outside the labour force.

Education of Manipuri Muslim Women

In Manipur, the Meitei Pangal did not place a high value on education, particularly western education. However, after learning about the numerous advantages of education, the youngsters were encouraged to enrol in schools and institutions. Males were free to attend educational institutions, however ladies were not, with the exception of a few, mostly the daughters of educated parents. However, the prognosis has shifted somewhat. The rising number of male and female students in schools and universities both inside and beyond the state reflects the changing attitude of the community toward education. The percentage of male and female pursuing education outside the state found to be 86.36% and 13.64% respectively. The students enrolled in different government and private schools. Students in primary level (I-V Class), constitute 60.07% which is the highest number of child enrolled, followed by middle level (VI-VIII) with 20.07%, pre-primary class with a share of 12.87 percent and lastly secondary (IX-10) level constitute only 4.99%. These numbers are from the both government and private schools enrolled students. While considering the government and private schools, 54.3% are found in private followed by government enrolled of students with 45.7%. However, literacy rate of Muslim women is very low remains 41.6 percent. From the Socio Economic survey of Meitei Pangal, 2004, it is found that boys child are given more priority than girls child education. This comes to the result of high dropout of girls child/women in education. These is gender stratification, it clearly sees the gender differentiation made women less empowerment.

Political Aspect

In Manipur, the Panchayati Raj institutions are functioning in accordance with two Acts namely, the Manipur Panchayati Raj Act, 1975, and the Manipur Panchayati Raj Act, 1994. The later was passed under the general guidelines provided in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. Although the Act of 1975 had provided for a three-tier system i.e. the Gram Panchayat at the village level, the Panchayati Samiti at the Block level and the Zilla Parishad at the district level, only a two-tier system was actually functioning. The Zilla Parishad at the district level had not been established. The Act, being the first to be passed by the Manipur Legislative Assembly, consisted of several relevant laws relating to the working of the Panchayati Raj institutions. A unique feature of the Act was that one seat was reserved for women in every Gram Panchayat and seats were reserved for the SC and ST populations also.

The Manipur Panchayati Raj Act, 1994: The main objective of the Act was to ensure the participation of the people in the effective implementation of rural development programmes. It provides for the establishment of the Gram Panchayat at the village level and the Zilla Parishad at the district level. It also provides for the reservation of seats for

Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population and women. The functions granted to Gram Panchayats and Zilla Parishads cover various subjects listed in the XIth Schedule of the Constitution of India. With this reservation policy Muslim women elected and represented in local government. Numbers of Muslim women participation can be seen more visible with the introduction of 73rd Amendment Act.

To get objective information about the participation and performance of women member in panchayat process of Manipur. It is important to go through the proceeding of panchayat meeting to identify and comprehend the real process of panchayat such as the nature of their attendance in the meeting, types of opinion expressed, their preference, note of dissents, their way of empowering in politics. Because of marriage in distance places offer becoming the members of the panchayat. The main reason hidden is due to pressing domestic needs and gender disparity. Most of the time Muslim women representatives didn't attend PRIs meeting. Those women actively participated in the discussion and deliberation in the matter relating to the present and the future action to be taken up by the panchayat are present in meetings and have interest for works to their concerned Gram Panchayat. Maximum of elected representatives are illiterate, mainly the lower post of Panchayat. They don't know the functions of PRIs. However, the post Pradhan and Zilla women members are mostly educated with bachelor degree/ lawyers etc. In reality, their husbands are continuing their works. It finds that elected women representatives have the family background of politics. Due to women's reserved seat, their wives/sister/daughter are contest for Panchayat election. It can't be generalised that, all the women members have proxy representation. There are some elected members, they do want their Panchayats work done independently, to take decision on their own. These seem less visible due to different factors. Women face difficulties while conducting works for Panchayat process whether in the office or in the village due to societal pressure, religion norms and lack of education. They face many hurdles to cross over the lack of antecedent experience in the PR processes which is supposed to be at the forefront of all.

The experienced of Manipur Muslim women regarding participation of women is not encouraging. The quality of performance of the elected women representatives dependent on social factors like literacy, education and the tradition of social reform movement in the region. Though, they occupied space in local governance through 73rd Amendment Act, yet there is still time to overcome the barriers that exist in society and the structure of the states to empower the disadvantage minority Muslim women. On the other hand, case of Kerala is different, the 73rd amendment seems to have a positive impact, regarding the empowerment of women is concerned.

Conclusion

From the first part of article, it is seen that, status of Muslim women in the field of social, economic and educational status are very low. They have no empowerment in any aspect. O. Kulabidhu argues, different efforts should be made to empower women which are multidimensional. Again, Bidyut Mohanty, points out the reservation policy of women empowered in real terms, social, economic and political conditions which facilitate and encourage their participation

need to be created. They should be socialized both in rural and urban areas. Women status needs to be empowered in every aspects-socially, economically and politically. However, women representatives tried to get involved in decision making, taking interest in their works. They need for reservation of seats, for implementing women's empowerment. The factors that effecting women's empowerment needs the social change and the policies of the state. The representatives are very new to the system, need proper training from the department or the NGOs, regarding the powers and functions of the PRIs. Women should be given more freedom and flexibility to exercise their power. The structural and institutional reform to neutralised the present power equation and make it more favourable for women. The provisions of reservation has not led women participating in decision making process. However, standing for elections has made a difference in the lives of those elected Muslim women. They made them realise that, illiterate prevents them from playing more active and responsible role in the affairs of the panchayat. Susan Wolf argues, women across diverse culture have been recognized women as indeed 'nothing but women' for too long period of time. This left women subjected to androcentric cultural norms that privilege men. This may rise the question of 'how to move beyond that specific, distorting kind of recognition. Here, the reservation policy give a means for the disadvantage section of society. Reservation together with the notion of affirmative action for the minority women with the education have the potential to transform the lives of the women. Female literacy is much needed, independent, voting rights, change in the status of family and society for women to fully participate in the public sphere.

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