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Empowering or Empowered: Myths and Facts about Women in Haryana

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ABSTRACT

Haryana has been of the swiftly growing state of India and to a large extent, a state which has already itself in different fields of development. Any parameter applied on the evaluation of progress may come up in glorious term. However, the present paper meticulously explores the status of women in the backdrop of political activism in Haryana. Of course, many laws have been brought in to strengthen their status by ensuring their roles in various slots in the field of politics. Many amendment has been made in legislation by the central governments from time to time and the state governments have also acted upon the suggestions forwarded by various agencies and societies by which they are in better position now. However, the other side of the story is that, these laws and amendments proved no more than set of rules existing on papers only. Hence, the paper deliberately takes into account both of these version and attempts to reach at a rational and logical conclusion.

The political status of women can be defined as the degree of equality and freedom enjoined by women in the shaping and sharing of power and in the value given by the society to this role of women. The recognition of women's political equality in the Indian constitution was a radical departure, not only from the inherited norms of traditional Indian Society, but also from the political norms of most advanced countries at the time. Constitution pledged the nation to the principles of equality and guaranteed non-discrimination in employment and office under the State.

The constitution of India granted the right to Indian women. This brought women on an equal footing with men. The adult franchise granted in Article 326 by the Constitution, did much to remove sex discrimination.

Legislation was passed for the Panchayat Raj in 1956. To ensure the presence of women in the Gram Sabha, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad, a new law was enacted in the 1960s to set aside a few seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women. If women did not volunteer for election, they had to be co-opted.

Women voluntarily did not stand for elections, they had to be co-opted mostly. Even then, they would not attend meeting, as politics and participation in political institutions was considered unworthy of good women and because of *ghunghat*. At the village level registers would be sent to these women's home to record their attendance by their signature or thumb impression. Women were not generally allowed to enter the village *chopals* where the Panchayats customarily sit. Women's lack of education and the presence of their own male relatives (*jeth* or *sasur*) acted as strong deterrents. A woman maybe hesitant to speak up at a meeting if her family members have been employed by the members of the Gram Sabha or village Panchayat. Several male members do not accept women as equal participants. Traditional attitudes in rural society inhibited women's political participation. In this situation, women found it extremely difficult to face the tug-of-war with men and were able to get elected or co-opted only from reserved seats. Even though the Panchayat Raj Act require the presence of at least two women either by election or co-option in Panchayats, either the Law was ignored or those two women of upper castes or classes were co-opted whose husbands were members of the village Panchayats.

The economic dependence of women and the illiteracy tend to perpetuate the traditional statuses of women. They culturally were not trained to accept qualities of leadership, initiative, independence or organization ability. In her upbringing, a rural woman was taught to consider those qualities as undesirable for her. As a result, women were made to feel weaker. Those women who engaged in politics were considered masculine, thus abnormal. This led to alienation of these political women from society. People were not sufficiently educated about the aim of the constitution and the need for equal participation of men and women in all fields of activity. The readiness and willingness of the people to participate in the political process is a basic requirement.

Election statistics indicated a general trend of increase in the turn out of women voters in all Haryana. Their percentage increased from 68.14 percent in 1967 to 79.44 per cent in 1977 and 63.83 percent in 1991. When there was a general decline in participation of all voters. The difference between percentage turn out of men and women voters declined from 7.24 percent during 1967 to 1991 elections. It is not possible to establish a similar correlation between education or economic development and exercise of franchise by women. But better educated women should cast her vote independently. Yet the women who, though not formally educated, took a keen interest in politics and participated regularly. Women of the Scheduled castes and Lower Classes had a higher participation rate. Awareness of the power that the right of franchise given to them was far more widespread among women even in lower castes and classes than is generally believed. Most of these women were also aware of the secrecy of the ballot and observed that this permitted them to exercise their independent judgment in voting. The influence of husbands or village elders was strong, but there were significant exception to this rule and this influence on women exercising their right of franchise seemed to decline. In spite of such changes, the differences in the level of political information and understanding between men and women continued mainly due to the indifference of political parties towards women.

Levels of political awareness of women vary from region to region, class to class and community to community. They were conditioned greatly by the political culture of the area, the approach of political parties to women and the quality of the local leadership. The influence of education, urbanization and exposure to mass media was now always uniform. The relationship

between education and awareness did not always extend to participation. Political awareness of women also did not differ significantly between urban and rural areas.

In Haryana there are and have been some women who have taken active participation in the election politics of the state. Smt.Chanderawati, Smt.Parsani Devi and Late Kartari Devi, have won state assembly election four times. Smt. Shakuntla Bhagwariya, Vidya Beniwal, Smt.Susma Swaraj and Dr.Kamla Verma have won state assembly elections three times. Lajja Rani, Anita Yadav and Shanti Rathi have become member of assembly twice. The 2005 year assembly election has give new dimension to women political because state people have sent 12 women Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA's) to the state assembly, Smt. Sumita Singh, Meena Mandal, Gita Bhukal, Vijay Pandit, Poonam Rani, Kiran Chaudhary, Savitiri Jindal and Rekha Rani were the Ist time entrants to the Haryana assembly 2005.

Om Prabha Jain has the distinction to be Ist women Deputy Speaker of the Vidhan Sabha, Jasma Devi W/o Bhajan Lal former Chief Minister of Haryana, Madhvi Kirti grand daughter-in- law of powerful dalit leader Jagjivan Ram and Janki Man have also been elected to the Vidhan Sabha once. Ms. Shelja (Minister of State at the Centre) has the distinction of being elected as Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) four times. No other woman from Haryana has so far been elected for four terms. Smt.Chanderawati and Sudha Yadav have represented Haryana in the Lok Sabha in 1977 and 1999 respectively. Smt. Kailaso Devi has represented Haryana twice in Lok Sabha from Kurukshetra, Smt. Sushma Swaraj and Vidya Beniwal have been elected for Rajya Sabha once from Haryana. Presently Smt. Sumitra Mahajan is representing Haryana in Rajya Sabha. Ist Speaker Vidhan Sabha was also a lady- Shatro (Shanno) Devi (from 6.12.1966 to 17.03.1967).But unfortunately most of these women leaders have not come through Panchayati Raj Institution and therefore they have not been able to contribute much to the rural women needs. Table 3.28 below provides a broad view of women leaders.

Yet women's participation in the political process has shown a steady increase. But their ability to produce an impact on the political process had been negligible because of the inadequate attention paid to their political education and mobilization by political parties. The structure of the parties made them male dominated. "Most party men were not free from the general prejudices and attitudes of the society. They had tended to see the women voters and citizens as appendages of the males and had depended o heads of families to provide block votes and support for their parties and candidates". So, the right to political equality had not led women to play their roles as partners and constituents in the political process. So, political progress did not change the position/status of rural Haryana women in any progressive manner.

Profile of Women Participation in Haryana Assembly Elections

Years of Election	Voting %age of women	Number of elected women	%age of elected women	No. of women	Total strength
1967	42.97	5	6.17	8	81
1968	44.01	7	8.64	11	81
1972	44.84	4	4.96	12	81

1977	60.98	4	4.44	20	90
1982	67.37	5	5.05	27	90
1987	67.53	5	5.05	37	90
1991	63.82	6	6.65	27	90
1996	68.10	4	4.44	54	90
2000	67.85	4	4.44	46	90

Source: Election Commission India

The participation of women in voting registered a marked increase in the successive elections till 1987. The gap in the percentage of voting of men and women, minor fluctuations, notwithstanding, too gradually narrowed down in these elections. However there was a marked decline in the voting turn out of women in 1991 elections. This may have been due to dissatisfactions with politics among a section of voters during the period proceedings these elections. But there was a significant rise in their turn out in the 1996 elections. Even the escalation of corruption in the state during 1991-1996 failed to dampen their enthusiasm.

The Amendment of seventy third of the Indian constitution presents a water-shed in the political history of the country. It ensured the establishment of Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI or local governance bodies) at gram (village), taluk (sub-district) and zila (district) levels. Further it provided for the reservation of a third of the seats in all the bodies for women. Panchayati Raj system with reservation for women has become the focus point of women's participation in planning, decision making and implementation for rural development. With women's increased representation as elected members, they would be able to participate more actively in planning, decision making and implementing different development programmes in the society. "Since women are located in different household, casts, communities and regions and are bound by distinct rituals, practices and structures of power they rarely view themselves as a group with similar demands and needs. They are often governed by decisions that other takes on their behalf which are unquestioningly followed." The most radical feature of the Act is that it has reserved 33 per cent of the seats (as per the population) for scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (STs) and 33 per cent (irrespective of population size) for women. These representations are ensured through the reservation of territorial constituencies for the concerned groups. The reserved constituencies are not fixed but are rotated to either different constituencies of a Panchayat or different Panchayats of the Samitis undoubtedly, participation in the public domain would help to empower women. But the question is, does a reservation for women in a system of part of politics change gender equations? What cannot be ignored is that this politicization has taken place in a socio-economic milieu where caste, class and gender ideologies interest in complex, interrelated yet antagonistic relationships.

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