

National Consultation on Women and Governance - specific focus on state politics

Organized by: NAWO, Dept. and Centre for Women Studies, Punjab University, and Women 2030 at Chandigarh 27-28 February 2019

Subject : Activism - the foundation for women's involvement in governance

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Women's foray into politics in Maharashtra springs from their participation in number of social movements and struggle veering around demands for women's rights and equality. Indian women played a paramount role during independence movement which subsequently led women's involvement into state governance although statistically it still remains dismal.

Though Indian Constitution guarantees equal opportunities for women in all fields, it has been a continuous struggle for women to claim those rights on the backdrop of lack of required political will to help women enjoy equal involvement in governance. Women activists in Maharashtra have laid down the foundation for gender friendly political reforms to ensure the equal social justice and security for women. This paper traces gender dynamics involved in women's political participation in Maharashtra, post-Independence, using 1975 as a take off point moving ahead with challenges faced in implementation of SDGs today in bridging the gender gaps. Activism continues to be a powerful political tool for women in Maharashtra even today to address issues such as natural disasters, economic, social and religious concerns.

The paper shall also analyse the salient reformatory social political changes propelled by women's participation in state movements that benefitted women of all sections of society across India. Focus will be on the success of women's movements with their acquired capacity to link micro-macro processes to push demand for series of gender just policies opening opportunities for their positive active political participation.

Gender justice has been in the forefront of all issues addressed by women in India post-independence. Similar to women's social movements across the world the women of India too struggled to shape the reforms we see on the socio-political arena today. Beginning with the nationalist movement that heralded the emergence of an Independent nation in 1947 to the present day demands towards a gender just social movement – the journey for the women of this country catapulted reforms to shape the future destiny of young Indians.

This paper addresses the impact of sustained collective action led by women social activist leaders for ensuring equal participation of women in governance through demands for progressive state policies. Activism is the crucial foundation for women's involvement in governance. The Indian constitution ensured women's equal status but 70 years later women still have to agitate for their rights. The women's political participation has passed through many phases. Beginning with Indian independence struggle the women's movements prioritized several social and religious reforms. This phase focused on women's struggle to seek an identity, and search for human rights through various issues of toiling masses such as those of landless women, farmer women, save girl child forums, etc. The women social activists mobilised women and people around the issues that concerned them. Many of the women activists who were also involved in the nationalist movement became reformist and got involved in the nation building task.

India has experienced a whole array of social movements involving women, peasants, dalits, adivasis, and others. Gail Omvedt in her book *Reinventing Revolution* points out that concerns about social inequality and the unequal distribution of resources continue to be important elements in these movements. Peasant movements have mobilised for better prices for their produce. Dalit labourers have acted collectively to ensure that they are not exploited. The women's movement addressed issues of gender discrimination at workplace and within the family.

This paper will particularly focus on the socio political struggle of women in

Maharashtra vis a vis their contribution to the post-independence national agenda or women. To mention a few who pioneered the women reformists struggle, the efforts of Usha Mehta, Mrunal Gore, Aruna Asif Ali. Tara Reddy, Premila Dandavate several women activists achieve historical significance in that they highlighted the inferior status of women in the country. Mention needs to be made about the education reforms for women in Maharashtra ushered by Savitri Phule and her husband Mahatma Jyotiba Phule despite severe social religious opposition. This paved the first social movement towards gender just reforms.

The women's suffrage struggle surfaced with mass support from these quarters - The Indian Nationalist movement; The Socialist Reform Movement; and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. A major contribution for ensuring equality to women rests with reforms introduced by Dr. Ambedkar through the Hindu Code bill - where several Dalit women and upper caste women, (agitating against polygamy, variations in Hindu law across different states) felt the need for codification of Indian Hindu law. Hence women's movements do show several shades of political perspective - and its impact seen in the new emerging women's movements in India as well as globally. The year 1975 is crucial as it is the landmark year for Indian women to become part of the world process to be involved globally in the decade of the women worldwide. Thus a symbiotic relationship with women of the world emerged. Women activists aggressively advocated for changes in laws on social issues affecting women (rights of women, dowry deaths, safety in public places, rape, sexual harassment, violence free society), supported by women's organisations all over the nation. The new paradigm of women's social movements in Maharashtra surged in to bring changes in law to intercept social and religious customs affecting women, influenced largely by the following movements -

- Socialist and liberal reforms movement heralded by Shri Jayaprakash Narayan
- Communist movement related to Marxist Lenin section propagated by leftist groups like CPI , CPM and several independent groups

- Dalit movement – a mass movement encompassing the scheduled class and castes of India to seek new spaces joined by Dalit women

During this period irrespective of women's political participation, women's organisations and activists geared up to raise the issue of women's reservation in local self-government bodies. Noted economist and social thinker Dr. V M Dandekar proposed to the Indian government to reserve seats for women at Zilla Parishad (District Councils) and Mahanagar (Municipal bodies) Panchayat level, and at the Assembly and Parliament level there was no need for reservation to women.

There were two trains of thoughts that were observed in the Maharashtra state during that period –

- The group of women in formal politics felt that if reservation to women was enacted then they would be at the mercy of their political bosses. Irrespective free and fair political participation, reservation will create a support mechanism on which will increase dependency and reduce the autonomy of women working on various issues.
- The second train of thought reflected the aspirations of emerging young women- new political aspirants, who visualized their increased participation at least at local bodies level to begin with and later on move upwards.

This struggle of Indian women for participation in national politics as well as in the Maharashtra state political arena was largely influenced by a mass movement which had gathered nationwide momentum at that time - women's organisations, women political leaders collectively agitating against price rise "*Mehaghai virodhi andolan*" supported by masses of people (1973-74). This historical change ushered a new era for Indian women in politics who got working space to deal with social issues and view them from gender perspective Another movement that propagated the need for gender inclusive governance was the '*anti dowry*' movement

heralded by Premila Dandavate of Maharashtra Dakshata Samiti at New Delhi. This was followed by "*Paritakta Andolan*" focusing on the security and safety of single women and women headed households that gained nationwide support from various women's organizations. In Maharashtra two forums were formulated by the state government, '*Stree Sangharsh Chalval*' and '*Mahila Dakshata Samiti*' (formed in 1995) to handle issues of women and bring them to the notice of the governance. The writer of paper was an active stakeholder part of these forums and has put up several issues of the masses.

Women activists were able to mobilise women collectively in a sustained and organised manner, as they were able to address the grievances of the people particularly women hence shared an ideology and strategy. Mancur Olson's book *The Logic of Collective Action* argues that a social movement is an aggregation of rational individual actors pursuing a goal. The Peasant movements mobilised for better prices for their produce and protested against the removal of agricultural subsidies. Dalit labourers acted collectively to ensure that they are not exploited by upper-caste landowners and money-lenders. And the women's movement worked on issues of gender discrimination in diverse spheres especially the workplace and within the family

The period, 1975 to 1980 reflects the happenings at national level influencing policies at the state level. Some of the changes seen in the state were initiated by the centre –

- Security for women within the families
- Property rights of women
- Emergence of autonomous women's organizations

According to historian E. P. Thompson showed that the 'crowd' or women's organisations were not made up for destructive forces out to destroy society, instead, they too had a 'moral economy' - their own shared understanding of right and wrong as directed by their activist leaders. Their

research showed that poor/ distressed people and women in urban or rural areas had good reasons for protesting. They often resorted to public protest because they had no other way of expressing their anger and resentment against deprivation.

The decade 1980 – 1995 – saw more than 100 women’s mass organizations proliferating in Maharashtra alone. A few of these organizations took proactive stand when it came to handling issues of grassroots democracy. This period can be labeled as an era of institutionalization – when various tools for women emancipation were put into practice.

- Committee set up for forming women’s commission
- Women in politics demand for more space in governance –with increase in women voters mass base
- Manifesto of women’s movement (1989 – 1993) published –list of women elected in various government bodies

Two organizations founded by the author (Dr. Gorhe) namely ‘*Krantikari Mahila Sanghatna*’ and ‘*Stree Aadhar Kendra*’ have been active for past 35 years advocating relevant policy changes on issues affecting women in Maharashtra. Further the author also drafted agenda for political parties’ policies to enable them to fulfill their duties as leaders. This is mentioned here just to give message that the women need not be mere passive recipients of the political process but should participate as representative of vibrant critical mass of women voters. The women’s organizations have helped elected women to create space in the political arena.

The efforts were on to enable women to be a part of the governing system and not remain outside the changing social political purview. They need not be termed as ‘*bechari*’ women, but as empowered women demanding their rights. Due to active initiatives the Women’s movements gained visibility.

Continuing their work in the next decade of 1991 – 2000, the demands of women’s organizations led to some highlighted achievements:

- 1991 a committee set up having women representatives from all political parties as well as women activists from NGOs, to discuss and formulate alternative law concerning CrPC 125 referring to maintenance of separated women.
- 1992 another landmark decision by the state government – setting up of Women’s Commission on the lines recommended by the Centre. In a record 3 months’ time the draft was prepared with inputs from 5000 women participants.
- In 1993 the first Women’s Commission was set up in the state where the author was the first Conveyor. As per the Committee’s recommendation the special bill was passed in the Maharashtra State Assembly.
- In 1994 the Bill for Reservation of Women in local Government bodies was introduced at National level, and at the state level Women’s State Policy was formulated as per demands of women’s organisations which included the following features:-
- - o Property rights for all girls in the family
 - o Land records in the name of husband and wife made mandatory
 - o All houses, property, photo passes in the joint name of husband and wife
 - o Relook at various laws related to safety and security of women from perspectives of gender justice.
 - o Redevelopment and reframing the Women’s Development Finance Corporation and Women’s Commission and other institutions - where instead of welfare angle an empowerment aspects to be focused.

As a part of global women’s movement coincided with 4th World Women’s

Conference at Beijing in 1995, the Women's Coordination Committee and NGOs Advisory Committee came into existence at the National level. This Committee held dialogues with representatives from political parties, trade unions, social and women's organizations. In Maharashtra 50 women's organizations were identified from across all sections of the society to work together to work with National advisory committee.

The most crucial focus of this paper is to understand how the women in the state are placed today. The period 1995 to 2018 saw a reflection on the status of women. If one observes the women's organizations and women in governance during this period then one would see that obviously women's agenda has become visible

There are some serious concerns also which restricts women's participation in mainstream political processes. This is due to the fact that despite all the improvising for women empowerment, the number of women who get space in the state assembly is very meager barely 8% to 10%. Several factors attribute to this low representation at the level of state assembly. Some of the major reasons observed are:-

- Character assassination
- Muscle power
- Money power

These factors inhibit aspiring and promising women to take the active political route. Thus many women prefer the 'activist' roles to demand rights and highlight social issues, rather than be a part of active 'governance'. Further, those already in the political arena elected on various government bodies at the local level face another hurdle that leaves them disappointed and disheartened. The Reservation bill although guarantees women's participation in governance at local level it is still wrought with challenges.

One of the challenges is the process of constituency reservation for three consecutive terms, after which the post will be reserved for other caste. Although all caste women get political representation through reservation,

yet, this process eroded the very base of women's political movement because women will not get opportunity as per her caliber but as to how she fits politically into the reserved seat. It defeats the essence of good governance and limits the time available for the elected women to work effectively on that reservation. However mention needs to be made here that the Mumbai BMC (Brihan Mahanagar Pallika) under the 'Shiv Sena' regime disregarded this reservation bill in consultations with women's organizations to appoint capable women (from other than reserved categories) disregarding her caste considering her caliber alone to the reserved posts for good governance. From 2009 the women in local bodies raised from 33% to 50%.on proven merits alone.

The year 2010 was retrospection into analyzing various bottlenecks faced by women in governance. Women in governance faced several backlash from own party workers. Elected women have box type of participation in governance. An active and genuine women leader faces several challenges at the local level especially from elected male colleagues, who fear to face the challenge of women at decision making level. Hence decision making is limited for women. How much space is given to women in governance depends on the particular party policies. Often women in governance, despite having capabilities, follow stereotyped functioning and refuse to venture into larger territories fearing inability to meet deadlines, handle issue based politics, hence the box type limited functioning at local bodies.

Good governance calls for equal involvement of women. Based on the author's experience of active political participation the following suggestions are offered:

- Women need to work at decision making levels and have a say in all related matters

- Women need guidance to move forward to better positions at state level as they also gain people's mandate to represent them

- Women inclusive governance at all levels with independent hold and infrastructure where they are answerable to the highest authority
- Interactive men and women's forums Quasi judicial powers to make own decisions

Other few areas that women leaders need to see as opportunities to work on are related to Gender responsive budgeting and agenda for women security. Unfortunately, these are presently moving at a very slower pace. The SDGs have a component of women empowerment where every goal is connected to each other through different ways to various processes to move towards the 2030 goals (e.g. 50% reservation at all levels). However, the plans at national and state levels are not clear also still not transparent. Very few elected women are aware of the SDGs.

Women as representatives of local government bodies are becoming proactive on environment issues for e.g. Cities like Mahableswar and Panchgani (Maharashtra) managed by 50% women at local bodies, have become garbage and plastic free cities and efforts are on to make the city rivers and lakes pollution free. All this was possible because of ban on plastic imposed by State governance which enabled women in governance to move ahead. So there is a resurgence of new women's movement. These newly elected women in governance after 2010 have taken up cudgels on different local issues like social security, health and SDGs, etc. So the journey which began from price rise, dowry, to social security, etc. has moved towards local, national and on to global issues. In fact an activist woman's slogan crafted thoughtfully by women in Gachhirol district, reflects the prevalent mood of women in governance, viz says *'Delhi Mumbai mein hamari sarkar aur hamari goan mein hamhi sarkar'*.

The slogan reflects the change occurring in the women's lives, be it the women from city slums or farmer women from rural village or tribal women demanding PESA act implementation or caste related sexual violence affecting women. The women's organisations and activists have risen to move ahead taking along sensitized men with them towards a gender just society not a distant dream but a possible future reality by 2030.

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Social field: The author is Founder and Chairperson of Stree Aadhar Kednra, a women's development organization operational in Maharashtra and India from 1984 and also founder of a women's mass based organsiation namely Krantikari Mahila Sanghtan [Women's Revolutionary front established in 1981].

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(The paper is prepared in assistance with my colleagues Aruna Ashtekar and Shirish Kulkarni who are senior social researchers and development professionals)
