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### A Study of Women as Decision Maker in the Political Domain and the Inclusive Development

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#### Abstract

*The present paper reviews the existing paradox between the inclusive development and deprivation of women, of their right to political participation and representation, as a decision maker in the parliament and the state legislative assemblies in India. Perplexedly the idea of inclusive development is promoted in all areas of life and the gender inequality is also likely to persist everywhere. The domain of Indian politics is no less different. The Indian politics is characterised by the prevailing large gender gap and inequality. Women being the victim of gender inequality are deprived of their due share and rights in life. Women as decision maker, is never accepted by the patriarchal society which is manifested in the national and state legislative assemblies too. Amidst the prevailing gender inequality, the country aims to achieve the goal of inclusive development. Development without equity and social justice is unattainable. The fact of political status of women is not appropriate with the concept of inclusive development.*

**Keywords:** Political exclusion, Inconsistency between deprivation and development, Gender inequality, Exclusion amidst inclusion, Political rights

The present paper mainly focuses on the concept of political empowerment of women, by considering their role as decision maker, as an attribute of inclusive development. Henceforth, the present paper is just a modest attempt to comprehend if the process of inclusive development in terms of its attempt to include the women and make them a part of the process of inclusive development by regarding them as a beneficiary of the developmental affairs or not. However, it is generally perceived that the development should be integrative by giving emphasis on the political pluralism by ensuring active participation of all in the policy-making and decision-making process. However, the age-old deprivation of women and the development process are contrary to each other. The women are one of the marginalised groups who are being excluded since long past from the development process. Consequently, they don't receive the fruits of the development directly and have been subjected to various kinds of gender discriminations and injustices in every domain of their lives. Besides women as a decision maker is unfashionable and do not fit with norm and belief system of the patriarchal society. Therefore, the participation of women in the national and state level decision making is not acknowledged basically. The exclusion of women is a serious setback for empowering the women which in turn

inhibits the process of inclusive development as a whole. On the one end the idea of inclusive development is gaining popularity and on the other end the age-old problem of women's deprivation does not show any sign of improvement till date. However, deprivation is not reconciled with the concept of development.

However, it is generally perceived that the gender equality as a significant facet of inclusive development which gives emphasis on creating and distributing equal opportunities, resources, benefits amongst all the sections in the society. The women as one of the marginalised groups are excluded so long from the process of development. "Inclusive development means that marginalised and excluded groups are actively involved in all aspects of development processes. As a 'pro-poor approach that equally values and incorporates the contributions of all stakeholders - including marginalised groups- in addressing development issues', inclusive development 'promotes transparency and accountability, and enhances development cooperation outcomes through collaboration between civil society, governments and private sector actors' (Oxfam n.d., p.1) (TIESEN & DELANEY, 2018, p. 3).

However, their contribution to the development process was never been acknowledged significantly.

"India's democratic environment and tradition of public reasoning have contributed significantly towards developing a robust legal foundation for gender empowerment, although the argumentative foundation did not necessarily translate into gender equality with respect to other proximate indicators. It is all too well known that when it comes to gender development indicators, India as a nation is often placed at the bottom of international rankings." (Singh, 2012, p.1).

In fact, the women are being deprived of political rights and power. The male members in the society seek to maintain the status quo by retaining their hold on the political power and accordingly are opposed to any kind of initiative which has a potentiality of transforming the dynamic of existing power structure in society. Therefore, the women are voluntarily being kept out of the domain of decision-making at large.

"Yet, in reality, women's participation in decision-making at all levels-national to local-is low." (Singh, 2006, p. 23).

Consequently, the women inevitably feel the necessity of empowering themselves to avail the prevailing opportunities of development. However, they claim their share of the political power particularly of the decision-making power as an important element of empowerment which inevitably would lead to development.

"Participation of women is an integral part of democratic process and strengthening the quality of civic life. As they are half the population, women must be in decision-making in all socio-economic and political organizations." (Singh, 2006, p. 23).

Against the above-mentioned historical backdrop, the demand of electoral reservation for the women comes into being.

Deprivation is basically the result of lack of parity in the distribution of natural resources and myriad social, political, economic and cultural opportunities. The present paper focuses on deprivation of women as a decision maker in the national and state legislative assemblies. However, the deprivation is man-made which is emanated from

withholding something. Hence the deprivation leads to inequality. The women as a decision maker, both in the public and private sphere, have always been deprived by the patriarchal society. Accordingly, the women are lagged behind in the Parliament and the state legislative assemblies despite the prevailing one-third reservation of electoral seats in the local self-government. Theoretically some sort of egalitarianism and social justice is established by the means of reservation in the panchayats and municipalities. However, the Parliament and the state legislative assemblies are characterised by the prevailing gender discrimination since a wide gender gap exists between the men and women representatives. The reason is the unequal distribution of opportunities which is reflected in the political sphere either. Hence the underrepresentation of women in the national and state level decision making is against the idea of inclusive development. Gender inequality in the political sphere cannot ensure the gender parity in the society and economy. Low rate of women's representation is the outcome of the lack of right set of circumstances in the past and at present as well. The future prospect of the Women's Reservation Bill as a means of ensuring 33 per cent reservation of electoral seats for the women in the Parliament and the state legislative assemblies is uncertain because of the postponement of the passage of the bill in the Lok Sabha. Hence the attainment of the goals of inclusive development will be an elusive dream amidst the unequal representation and participation of women in the national and state level decision making. The lack of gender justice in the social, political and economic sub-structure has in turn influenced the process of inclusive development at large.

The discussion of political exclusion of women as a decision maker will remain incomplete without discussing the most controversial Women's Reservation Bill. The bill itself reflects the reality of women's exclusion and the dispossession of political rights. The demand for the 33 per cent electoral seat reservation for the women in the Parliament and the state legislative assemblies was revived right after the passage of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Acts in the year of 1992 and 1993. The women in the rural area are incorporated in the decision making which is still absent in the national and state legislative assemblies. Consequently, the Parliament and the state legislative assemblies become an epitome of gender imbalance. Reservation as a means of establishing gender balance in the field of politics in general and in the sphere of decision making in particular was not taken into consideration by the Constituent Assembly. The female representatives in the Constituent Assembly believed that the reservation cannot empower the women politically rather they always gave emphasis on selection by talent and ability. To them the women need to establish their true worth and should equalise their political status in the decision making by the proving their excellence and effort. Later on, the women's organizations and groups compelled the Committee on The Status of Women in India (CSWI), which shed a light on the miserable truth regarding women's political condition by publishing the most popular Towards Equality report in 1974, to advocate 33 per cent reservation of seats for the women in the national and state legislative assemblies. The CSWI recommended the reservation of electoral seats for the women in the local self-government by refusing the demand of the women's organizations then.

"The committee had recognised the social inequalities and disabilities that hamper women. So, it had recommended the establishment of Statutory Women's Panchayats at the village level, reservation of seats for women in

municipalities as a transitional measure, the constitution of permanent committees in municipalities to initiate and supervise programmes for women, and inclusion of women in all important committees and delegations." (Desai & Thakkar, 2001, p. 116).

In 1988, the National Perspective Plan (NPP) advocated for 30 per cent reservation of seats for the women at the level of local- self bodies and in the political parties followed on the line of CSWI. Accordingly, one-third electoral seats are reserved for the women in the Panchayats and the municipalities by passing and implementing 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Acts in 1992 and 1993. Perplexedly, both the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Acts were not subjected to any debate or controversy during their passage. Thus, the reservation policy through the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Acts can be reckoned as a means of including the women in the political process.

Now what is important is to evaluate the consequences of 33 percent reservation of electoral seats, for the women in the panchayats and municipalities, for its attempt of including and empowering the women as a whole. Generally, this has led to a kind of ambiguous repercussion. On the one hand, in some states, women at the level of local self-government particularly at the panchayat level played a very significant role. For instance, the states like Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Haryana, Gujrat, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Telengana where women sarpanches have contributed much to the development of the society. Therefore, the purpose of having electoral reservation for the women at the local self-government has been successful in all the above stated states in a true sense of term.

"There are many instances in Karnataka, Rajasthan, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and other states where women have fought bravely against corruption, alcoholism and other social evils, and have worked for the development of the community. A study points out the commitment of members of the all-women panchayats in Maharashtra (Datta). West Bengal's first all-women gram panchayat in Kultikri has also performed well in spite of many problems it faces." (Desai & Thakkar, 2001, p. 118).

Consequently, the sarpanches help to achieve the transparency of the government. Besides, the people are now provided all the necessary services related to health, hospital, school, roads, water, sanitation, electricity etc which was perhaps neglected earlier.

"Some studies of Parliamentary participation indicate that women members participate more actively in 'Women's issues' - health, welfare, atrocities against women, crimes like dowry and violations of human rights." (Singh, 2006, p. 27).

Moreover, the sarpanches have worked hard in empowering the women in their locality too. Hence, it is a widely held view that the electoral reservation for the women at the panchayats and municipalities has earned for the women an empowered and dignified life by elevating their status in both the public and private sphere. However, the other side of the successful story is that in most of the cases it has been found that the women and their position in the local self-government is exploited in the name of proxy which in turn helps to maintain the powerless and subjugated status of the women. As a result of this, the women remain negligent to political affairs and at the same time they are disregarded as a decision maker for their very own reasons or the reasons imposed on them by the society.

“Threats of character assassination, criminalisation of politics and political violence are enough to throttle the political ambitions of a woman. The ordinary woman has developed an apathy, even a dislike, towards the word ‘Government’ and ‘Authority’.” (Desai & Thakkar, 2001, pp. 112-13).

Nevertheless, the discussion of electoral reservation of the women would remain incomplete without a discussion of the reservation of electoral seats for the women at the level of national and state legislative assemblies. After the implementation of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment acts the similar demanded for one-third electoral seat reservation for the women in the national and the state level decision-making could not be ignored further.

“Evidently, the success stories of elected women representatives at the local level, especially in the Panchyati Raj Institutions, have sent signals of the determined efforts of women for change, creating anxiety in male-dominated power structures.” (Desai & Thakkar, 2001, p. 117).

As a result, the Women’s Reservation Bill was introduced as 81<sup>st</sup>, 84<sup>th</sup> and 85<sup>th</sup> Constitutional amendment Acts which were not become a reality because of the cessation of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha.

“It is important to note in this context that there was not much resistance to the provision of reserved seats for women in the 73<sup>rd</sup> and the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments; it is only after the bill for the 81<sup>st</sup> amendment that unprecedented chaotic scenes in the House erupted over the bill, and there was a scathing denunciation of the bill in public debates.” (Desai & Thakkar, 2001, p. 117).

Later on, in 2008 the present 108<sup>th</sup> Amendment bill was introduced and eventually the bill was passed in the Rajya Sabha on 9th March in 2010. Howsoever, the bill remains undecided in the Lok Sabha since then. The bill has been opposed due to many reasons and amongst them the most significant reasons are caste related issue the lack of OBC quota, equity issue that the gender-based reservation policy is discriminatory in nature, the issue of national integration and power redistribution. Delay in the passage of the bill reflects the insecure mind set of the patriarchal society which does not want to provide a right set of circumstances to the women for including them in the national and state level political domain as a decision maker. Nothing has done so far to rectify the past deprivation of women rather the male dominated society seeks to maintain the status quo by distributing the opportunities unequally between men and women. This simply represents the paradox which has undermined the objectives of inclusive development undoubtedly. In other words, the Women’s Reservation Bill is considered to be a significant means for pursuing active political participation and the empowerment of the women by the protagonist of the bill.

“The reservation policy is not an end in itself; we should see it as a means to achieve gender equality. It is important that women enter in decision-making bodies in sizeable numbers, this ‘critical mass’ is important if women’s voices are to be heard in politics.” (Desai & Thakkar, 2001, p. 119).

The women have to be included as an active partner in all the areas of life in general and as a decision maker in the parliament and state legislative assemblies in particular. This must be treated on a priority basis. Hence the inclusive approach has to be adopted

towards the women to meet the requirements of inclusive development. Equal number of opportunities should be provided to the women to uplift the political status of women. If the present generation of women are excluded and denied the opportunity of equal representation in the national and state level decision making then the women of future generation will also be excluded politically which is not desired at all. Without ensuring gender parity, social justice, respect for human rights for all and the wellbeing of all the sections of society the idea of inclusive development will no longer have any relevance which will be detrimental in the long run since there exists a strong link between gender parity and inclusive development. Hence the government should focus on making more gender equality policies for successfully accomplishing the goals of inclusive development. The issue of gender inequality and exclusion of women as a decision maker in general has become a common phenomenon which is maintained very carefully in all areas of life as yet. This needs to be rectified without further delay to make the development inclusive for all so that the present and the future generation including men and women can flourish and develop in a true sense of term.

“Nussbaum seeks a capabilities approach that can fully express human power and not just provide (race) opportunities for people to perform certain functions. In other words, she does not deny, as Sen argues, that a capability is a real possibility or opportunity for an individual to perform certain actions, but that is merely necessary and not sufficient for the capabilities approach. Sen is missing, according to Nussbaum, aspects of what is particularly unique to human beings, that is, human powers.” (Global Ethics: Capabilities Approach Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy).

According to M. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen the opportunities are important to maximise the skill, abilities. Inequality embedded in the structure and sub-structure of society cannot be replaced with equality without ensuring the equal distribution of myriad opportunities among all the sections of society. Apart from opportunities power is also a crucial aspect. Power is a necessity to enjoy liberty in a fullest sense. Therefore, everyone should be given their due share of power. Power is important for availing the opportunities. Opportunities without power would be meaningless. The women should be given equal and enough opportunities which are missing even today. Consequently, they are unable to develop their skill and capabilities. On the other hand, lack of power also makes them incapable of ameliorating their age-old poor condition. Opportunities and power are important condition of gender equality and justice. Accordingly, gender equality is an important condition of development.

The women must be ensured the equal opportunity of participating in the national and state level decision making like the panchayats and municipalities. Equal and active participation and representation can serve the purpose of women's political empowerment which will in turn help in the overall development of women.

Reservation is a kind of opportunity which is believed to open the door to Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies for the women. However, it is manifested through the partial success of the electoral reservation of women at the level of local self-government which gives the women the opportunity to firmly voice their political concern and express their opinion at the local level decision making. In other words, reservation would also

facilitate to secure their due share of political rights. It has the potentiality to dismantle the gender imbalance in terms of political representation of participation. However, the potentiality of the Women's Reservation Bill has been put into question by citing many drawbacks of the bill. Reservation has been considered as a vehicle of empowerment and inclusion process since the beginning and this is evident from the various existing reservation facility for the backward sections of the society to avail the prevailing social opportunities. The female representatives those who were against the reservation they must have focused on the structural discrimination to abolish all types of deprivation instead of rejecting the reservation outwardly in the beginning. The existing deprivation in terms of resources, opportunities, benefits, rights and power can no longer help in the enhancement of capabilities. Therefore, the persisting structural discrimination is a major setback for the inclusive development. Women have continuously been the victim of the structural disparity like the other marginalised groups in the society. Gender inequality is the outcome of structural discrimination and deprivation.

“Patriarchal structures have ensured that women's access to resources, health, education, and political representation among other things have remained heavily unequal.” (Seven Kinds of Deprivation That Women Face Every day- Economic and Political Weekly, 2019).

If the gender inequality is rooted in the system and structure that biased structure cannot promote and execute the ideas of inclusive development.

“Development is a holistic approach where all segments of society act collectively to participate in socio-economic and political uplifting (Saleem 2010).” (Womens Political Deprivation: A Natural Selection or Cultural Injustice the Case of Pakhtun Society, 2018).

Development cannot be lopsided; it is a complete process which can be accomplished with advancement of all the segment of society. Everyone should be benefitted by the development process irrespective of any biasness and unfair treatment. However, the reality is something different which is not in favour of inclusive development. Like men the women should also be considered as an agent of development.

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