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WOMEN IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

# WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

*Edited by*  
**Susheela Kaushik**

*Under the auspices of*  
INDIAN ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES



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SUSHEELA KAUSHIK

## CONTENTS

Introduction	ix
<i>Susheela Kaushik</i>	
1. Women in the Political Process: What Does it Mean?	1
<i>Mrinal Gore</i>	
2. Feminism: A Political Ideology	9
<i>V. Bhavani</i>	
3. Patriarchy, the State and the Women?	12
<i>Sadhana Arya</i>	
4. Participation of Women in Local Self Government	21
<i>Hazel d'Lima</i>	
5. Women Leadership at the Grassroot Level in Punjab	31
<i>Pam Rajput</i>	
6. State Policies and the Subordination of Women	45
<i>Padmini Swaminathan</i>	
7. Character of the State and the Women Question	57
<i>M. Bharati</i>	
8. Women and Political Consciousness	72
<i>Manu Bhaskar</i>	
9. Political Efficacy and Political Participation: A Study of Women's Involvement in Politics in India	77
<i>Snehlata Panda</i>	

viii		Contents
10.	Role of Women in Panchayati Raj <i>Rohini Gawankar</i>	88
11.	The Left Parties and the Invisibility of Women: A Critique <i>Chhaya Datar</i>	101
12.	Women's Movement: Perspectives and Strategies <i>Aparna Mahanta</i>	113
13.	Ideological Debates Among Autonomous Women's Groups in India <i>Vibhuti Patel</i>	126
14.	Anti-Price Rise Movement in Bombay <i>Usha Thakkar and Usha Mehta</i>	137
15.	Women's Participation in the Anti-Reservation Agitation in Ahmedabad, 1985: Some Issues <i>Sujata Patel</i>	148

## INTRODUCTION

Susheela Kaushik

Politics is essentially an art of acquiring and exercising power - the power to effectively influence the decision making processes and policies, to reverse the existing situation wherever they are disadvantageous and to bring about the necessary social changes. A participation in this exercise of power is very much a necessity, particularly for the disadvantaged group, in this instance, the women. But then, politics is also about power relations. Every social arrangement - be it in the public, professional sphere or in the private space of domestic sphere, is an instance of power relationship. Thereby whether it is the family, religion, caste or public institutions, they are all political institutions. Their mutual interaction thus becomes a political relationship and hence involves a modicum of power.

Women's studies and women's movement, hence, has a close linkage with the political processes. The broader political operations and the nature of political ideology in the public sphere, have its corresponding implications and impact for the women in the domestic and private relations.

The present volume thus concerns itself with the participation of women in the formal political institutions. Such a participation is very much a condition and indication of women's own present power and status; it is also a requirement for influencing the decisions in the future for promoting women's rights and development. Direct and visible participation helps to enlarge the freedom of the social group and accelerate the pace of its advancement. The lack of sufficient participation of women in politics and at the decision making levels, are themselves the results of their poor social and domestic status and their exclusion from certain positions and levels of power.

However, mere physical participation in the formal political institutions like elections or political parties, social movements or demonstrations is not enough. Even an enlarged participation by way of numbers or percentages may not lead to the advancement of the cause of the social group. Many a

study on the participation of women in the electoral process, by way of voting or candidature seem to mainly concern themselves with this type of a statistical package. Equally simplistic have been the studies which deal with the participation of women in the executive, administrative, judicial and local governmental (Panchayati Raj) machineries. Obviously, the theoretical premise of these studies is that women would promote women, would be able to understand, feel and empathise with their problems and aspirations, would be easily approachable and would better help in formulating and implementing policies for women. This may not be, however, true always. Equally significant is the level of political consciousness, in this case also gender consciousness. It is necessary to ask the question as to whose benefit is this participation directed. What impact has this participation made on the policies and the system over a period? Above all, to what extent has this visible participation acted as a role model and a fillip for others to come forward? For effecting this impact, it is equally necessary to assess as to the levels at which this participation is taking place. Once again, mere number is not enough; it has to be situated at levels which are significant and effective for exercising power. Massive mobilisation and numerically impressive participation in the political processes - formal and informal, are not goals in themselves. They are a means and a strategy for achieving something more fundamental, which the group can do only when its participation touches at the structure of politics itself. One has to, therefore, identify the broader processes of the political structure and the way power is arranged in a particular society. The ideology of the state, the interrelationship between the important components in its structure, like class, caste and gender and its basic developmental goals are essential in understanding the repercussions of participation. Often a vastly expanded participation and a wide mobilisation of a socially weak community - in this context women - has led to the strengthening of the present pattern of development rather than directing this pattern to their own development. Even values like equality (constitutional, political and economic), rights (property, access to resources) etc. may be meaningful only when women possess and exercise them consciously for bringing about a change in their own position as well as of the society; otherwise they will merely add up to strengthening and reinforcing the existing social system by operating within the framework of patriarchy. Values like equality and rights, concepts like participation and mobilisation need to constantly keep before them, the objectives of the client group; above all it should be related to and tested against another equally important value - justice.

Any assessment of the political participation of women in India, then, has to start by asking questions like whether such participation has led to bringing about or moving towards improving the quality of life for them or

even simply of making it more liveable for women. Whether such participation by women, either as individuals or as a group, has meant developing alternate strategies for development as well as structures of power? Whether the political interventions which women seek to make, start with women as points of departure or merely help women to infiltrate systematically in the existing hierarchies of power, thereby lending themselves to becoming women - performers or even worse, careerists? If increasing political participation has to have any meaning for women, such participation should be based on a widespread and well orchestrated mobilisation of women on the central issue of women's oppression and subordinate status in the society and family.

Any analysis of political participation of women in India hence, would have to combine a few components like (a) the extent, level and nature of women's participation in the political processes of India, by way of both formal and non-formal institutions (b) the impact and significance of such participation for women's rights and living conditions and (c) the types of feminist issues (that were) raised in the course of this participation.

It is equally important to remember that the participation of women in politics is very much circumscribed by many vital factors. The nature of the state, its stage of development, mode of production etc. are contextual factors that control the participation of common people in politics, women being the more affected. It is commonly believed that capitalism enables people to develop and attain equality, by unleashing their talents and rewarding it suitably and that in the case of women, it helps them to move from private space into public sphere. It is, however, doubtful that such a mobility and equality have really been facilitated either by capitalism or even socialism per se. The living examples of the western capitalist countries or socialist nations have not been much of a solace. This only confirms that the struggle against patriarchy and its state sponsorship, is a much more prolonged and complicated struggle, calling for persistent vigilance and strong mobilisation.

In India, there has been a combination of many modes of production, co-existing and reinforcing one another. The two strong feudal and capitalist modes have overlapped and exploited each other. This had been differently described as semi-feudalism, pre-capitalism or declining feudalism. To this have been added the efforts of a state operated public sector often with its ideal of being an alternate pattern of development, and a modern employer, the cultural heritage of ancient philosophical model of self sufficient villages and hand based industries that Mahatma Gandhi so keenly emphasised. The context of the colonial rule, superimposed on an ancient civilisation of an old society, has made India both peculiar and somewhat complicated. A multi-structured economy intervened by a multi-

religious and caste divided society - all arranged on a hierarchical model - it is difficult to classify India either as a capitalist or feudal, modern or ancient, equal or hierarchical. Its village society is collective with a strong individualistic trait, defiant but ready to play subordinate role, economically productive but still socially undeveloped. Such a combination has its consequences for the equality and rights of individuals, for the democratic operations of the polity and the modernised development of the economy. Of late, however, capitalism has taken much stronger roots and is seeking multi-national alliances and operations. As it does so, the pre-modern factors in the Indian society and culture have increasingly played their role to heighten their exploitation of the common people. Its implications for women are even more far-reaching, since often feudalism takes on the additional feature of patriarchy - the domination of men over women. The nature of the state is an alliance between feudalism, capitalism and patriarchy. The anti-feudal and anti-patriarchal struggles, then, have to be combined for the liberation of women. At the same time, the prevailing patriarchal values precisely prevent such a combined struggle. Often it is left to only women to stage the struggles for their survival and liberation and to closely link their participation in political struggles of the day.]

The present volume carries quite a few articles wherein the women's studies specialists have attempted to delve deep into the nature of the Indian state and its operations. While M. Bharati's paper focuses on the nature of the state from the vantage point of women, Sadhana Arya's contribution brings out clearly this close linkage between the patriarchal nature of the state and women's participation.

There is, hence, the need for a close reasoning between the status of women and the social order and values. As true political consciousness of women, hence, has to go beyond gender dichotomies and simple patriarchal institutions, says Manu Bhaskar, into the class nature of the state.

One can assess the participation of women in democratic process, under these various socio-cultural, historical and political-economic context, by citing one or two formal institutions in the Indian polity. The liberal, egalitarian legacy of the Indian National Movement had led to the Constitution of free India granting a position of equality of women by way of political rights. The provision of Fundamental Rights, particularly the Right to Vote to all women, it was assumed, would automatically take care of the various issues that had been bedeviling women for centuries and pave the way for their development much in the same way as it was viewed earlier that women's upliftment would come once freedom was achieved.]

[Has this right to vote been an effective means of achieving true equality and justice for women? As the paramount right, has this right led to other rights for women? To assess this, one would have to know whether and to

what extent have the women exercised the right to vote and participated in the formal political processes. In a thoughtful mood, Bhavani like many others, questions the very validity of this formal process.

Many studies believe that (i) women are not independent voters, (ii) that a majority of them are illiterate (iii) that a majority of them make their choice on the basis of suggestions from male members of the family - husband and sons and (iv) that women lack information and political awareness and (v) women are not politically conscious. However, these studies define the words political participation very narrowly. Despite these limitations, one may make a general analysis of the voting pattern of women. A quick glance at their participation in elections over the past four decades will confirm the initial hopes placed by the founders of the Constitution. The extent, nature and level of Indian women's participation is much greater than in many other countries - developed or developing, except possibly in the countries that were going through radical revolutionary wars. A certain cultural background as well as the freedom struggle could be the main reasons for this. This participation has been more or less steadily expanding over the years, through the various elections - by way of voting, as candidates and by participation in campaigning etc. The gap in the turnout between the men and the women is getting more and more narrowed. The number of women getting elected to the representative bodies is steadily increasing.

This increase in the turnout of women voters, particularly of the lower class and castes, may be attributed to a high degree of mobilisation, rather than of one's own political consciousness. In India, one can talk in general of high level of awareness of the value of vote, which is possessed and cast eagerly by the poor and the scheduled castes, at times very pragmatically and rationally. They are politically sensitive, well aware of their interests and even the political issues. But this awareness, in order to be translated into a political exercise like voting, needs tremendous mobilisation. This is all the more in the case of women, as poverty and daily work, household work and care, patriarchal and family norms act as great disincentives. Distance of booths, possibility of violence, health and other factors further discourage them. The linkage between the 'personal' and 'public' is missing, and women do not feel automatically impelled.

The increase in the number of women voters since independence, and their eager participation in voting, has made almost all the political parties pay special attention to organising them, campaigning among them, and choosing them to contest elections. Definitely in the earlier years such campaigning among women and soliciting their votes was done rather casually. Mobilisation in the past have been mainly at the time of elections in the form of ad hoc promises, made on populist and opportunistic short term basis, rather than on long term goals of a social change for women. However, to

the extent there was any correlation between the campaign promises and voting support, it also reflected on the low impact that the women's movement had made in educating the women, as well as in making a dent on the patriarchal politicians. [More recently the parties have organised regular party forums, cells and front organisations specially for women. These women's cells not merely mobilise and campaign among women, seek their support and membership for the party's issues during elections as well as normal period, but also quite often take up issues concerning women. Of late, the parties are, also taking a stand on women's issues, organising rallies and demonstrations, passing resolutions, lobbying with and pressurising the government for specific policies.] Women are participating in them in great numbers and have even courted arrest on issues like Sati, Muslim Women's Right to Maintenance, rape incidents, violence, police excesses on women, etc.

But there are many important questions to be asked in this context. In view of the extent of the recognition of the need for women's support both for image building as well as electoral successes, how many women have been able to occupy important positions in the party? There have been many important political personalities among women at the helm of various parties. There have been a number of women who were members of the highest executive committees of their parties and have functioned as office bearers. The Congress Party, particularly has taken care to give representation to women among its office bearers. In fact, it has almost become axiomatic in India that the highest decision making bodies of the various parties need to have definitely at least one or two women members. It is, however, necessary to ask the question whether it is a mere tokenism. Such representation by being very limited in number, as well as often occupied by weak and colourless personalities does become more a symbolism rather than real power wielding. There are of course some exceptions to this.

Despite the increase in the number of women contesting the election women still constitute only 1 to 2 per cent. Even where seats are reserved as in the Panchayats, they do not come forward so easily. Out of these contestants, the ones who get elected constitute still smaller percentage. While those who belong to the major political parties stand a better chance of success, the non-party candidates and those who belong to minor political parties, are hardly successful. Despite this many women contest as independents. This perhaps implies that the political parties are, by and large, reluctant to choose women as candidates, the maximum number of candidates being from the Congress Party. But even this party allotted only 3% of seats in 1977 to women. Obviously this is much more in the nature of tokenism rather than an acceptance of women's equality or capability. Often women candidates are viewed as depriving men of their chances.

Even the small number of women who contest gain, their candidature by their birth and close relationship with already established party leaders. Almost all the women who figure in electoral politics seem to be invariably someone's wife, daughter, daughter-in-law or other close relations. There are only few exceptions of women with the background of working with women or in politics. Most of these women thus come from urban, middle class, educated elite background and cannot claim a stage-by-stage growth or participation in their political career. Apparently, there is no correlation between female population and voting percentage with their number in the elected legislatures. The subordinate position of the 'ordinary' women in the families, their routine and normal duties of looking after the family, bringing up children, performing both the unpaid and paid work, do not allow them much scope to participate freely in the public political activities. To this must be added the economic factor. Elections in India as in all other modern democracies, have become very complicated, violent, dirty and expensive, inviting thereby very many legitimate and not so legitimate ways of finding and managing them. Women cannot obviously fit into this matrix of election. The participation costs in formal politics is at present too high for women. Political participation of women, by the conventional and formal yardstick, thus is low, and lower than men of even weaker sections. In the case of scheduled castes and tribes, due to the reservation of constituencies, the number of representatives is proportionate to the population. But it is ironic, if not cruel that only one or two of these seats had gone to women. No study has yet been undertaken on an all India basis, of the nature and extent of women's participation in the legislative business. In the early years after independence the Parliament did witness many women like Renuka Ray participating vigorously in the Hindu Code Bill, etc. More recently many women MPs belonging to all the parties are drawing attention to issues like atrocities against women, women's rights, statutory women's commission as well a social crimes like sati, dowry, rape, etc. Still by and large such participation is confined repeatedly to a few women. A majority of them are silent on many issues, particularly on the general, political concerns. On the whole it looks like those who are good and articulate are very good and participate often. Others are dormant, invisible and silent on most of the issues. Hence, mere presence of women in the Parliament even if of a greater number, will mean very little by way of women's development.

Participation of women in Panchayati Raj (Local Government) has been another area of great interest in India. Being mainly at the grassroot level and operating in the context of rural women, the participation in the local government has been viewed as essential in promoting women's consciousness and development at the local level as well as in training them for participation in the wider politics.

In the 1960s when many States enacted legislation for the representation of women in Panchayats, women's participation, consciousness and impact had emerged as crucial issues. The inclusion of women, by co-option and nomination if necessary, in the elected bodies, it was believed, would lead to a greater participation of women in the local political processes and thereby promote women's development through empowerment. Even though the experiment had not been totally satisfactory partly due to the small number of women (two women members out of the total roughly ten members) and partly because of lack of political consciousness, the Gram Panchayats and Mahila Mandals have been performing their roles moderately and working as training grounds. Many women in Maharashtra had even become Sarpanches. The whole experiment is considered as conducive, in the long run, for a democratic decentralisation wherein political power can devolve to women. In order that such participation in local government can bring about a change in the decision-making process as well as the nature of decisions, it is necessary that women's representation should be more.

The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women published in 1974 pleaded for provision of special opportunities for representation in local government and recommended the establishment of Statutory Women's Panchayat. Both the CSWI as well as the Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions (1978) suggested increase in number of women and even all women panchayats with autonomy and resources of their own, thus making women themselves responsible for their development. Apart from participating actively in making decisions, this would help in breaking the traditional attitudes towards women, as well as of women towards public participation. Quite a few studies by scholars and social activists have sought to assess the nature, extent and level of this participation, and the benefits they could derive out of the Panchayati Raj system, particularly in the light of their participation. The major issue in these debates is the participation of women in the Panchayati Raj institutions. Such a participation, in turn, has been dealt with at two levels, namely (1) the representation of women (alongwith Scheduled Castes and Tribes, the three being clubbed together of late as the weaker sections) in the Panchayati Raj institutions either as members or as functionaries, and (2) the substance and effectiveness of such representation. The studies have found that the co-option as a principle, is highly questionable both in theory and practice. Not merely is it undemocratic but also smacks of a protectionism based on the view of women as being weaker and incapable of fighting the elections. In practice, the co-option or nomination had meant sheer patronage of the dominant political or social group, and the women who got nominated had practically no experience in or inclination towards working for women and children. The

women's representation became one of the tokenism and ended as a near total failure. Many states have hence given up nomination or co-option and resorted to reservation as the only way of making sure that women are represented in the Panchayati Raj. One would, however, need more studies to show the total background of these women and the actual process of elections, (unanimous, nominated or contested) forces in operation etc. before one can talk about the democratic efficacy of this representative principle. There are, however, studies which point to instances where the women who have been elected to the Panchayats on this principle, have emerged as powerful spokespersons for the weaker sections.

Three of our contributors have taken up the experiments in the grassroots democracy carried out in Maharashtra and Punjab for detailed analysis. The limitations - social and personal - have been highlighted to point out that we still have to go a long way before the rural poor women can participate freely and boldly and take initiative in making decisions and monitoring the programmes for women's rights. Also possibly a token representation of one or two women cannot overcome the patriarchal and high class/castes oriented Panchayats way of arriving at decisions. Further, women can partake only when there are collective organisations like Mahila Mandals and NGOs existing in the rural society, articulating women's opinion and demands. There are, however, instances when women have already felt some impact by way of consciousness and empowerment, particularly where there are all women Panchayats. The ground trend is one of loosening of rigid postures and greater acceptance of the idea of women's entry in political activities. Not merely women of lower castes and classes, but even women of upper classes, informed and articulate are participating. With more political training of rural women, with more success for projects like DWACRA emphasising collective action, and legal literacy camps disseminating women's rights, one can hope for greater participation of women in local level democracy. The number of women sarpanches also needs to be increased.

As we talk of the participation of women in politics, an important issue that keeps cropping up is the relationship of women's movement with other political movements of a general nature, as well as the major political institutions of the day like political parties. This is both a theoretical as well as applied issue, as it is one which very many women's organisations face in their actual functioning. Should a women's organisation treat itself as exclusively women oriented and non-political and thereby, as often, end as a welfare organisation? Should it believe that women's issues are 'political' issues as they involve power-relations within and outside home, and hence view itself as a political activist group? In the latter case, should it join some of the existing political parties or politically oriented groups and work

through them or remain an 'autonomous' political group. In the second instance, it might help to be a lobby or pressure group that acts on one and all, but in the process loose out on political support and become isolated and marginalised, or even become dependent on one or the other when faced with challenges or survival.

Closely related to this, and in fact, influencing it is the deeper question of the linkages between women's issues and the general issues of the society and the political system. Are the issues of women's rights, equality, justice, and social status removed from the general nature of the socio-economic, cultural and political issues of the day? Can women's question be pursued independent of, and at times contrary to, the developments in the broader sphere? Can isolation and aloofness ensure women's issues, their strength to survive and pursue their goals? In the past, during the Independence Movement this has been proved impossible. A strong current of nationalism then and some other equally strong current during our times can, co-opt or sweep the women's issues and consciousness. Communalism and religious revivalism is one such current and involves participation of increasing number of women. Possibly the women's movement can stand on its own if it is strong enough not merely to steer clear in its own course, but even to intervene in the major trends of the day. This is perhaps why, women's issues, women's organisations and women's movement far from being isolated, perceive their role to be an active and interventionist one, as the conscience keepers of the society. This, however, would immediately mean a linkage, and not isolationism, from other political organisations and movements.

Closely related to this is the participation of women in other social movements and activities of the day. Participation in trade union and peasant movements, in the reservation (anti- or pro-) agitations, anti-price rise demonstrations are some of the instances. The issues fought may not be women's issues; they may be general issues that concern women and men. But the participation of women not merely make the women 'visible' but also strengthens the movement and gives it publicity. Further their participation helps to steer the movement in certain directions, often away from sexism and violence. In fact, women's participation in such wider social movements and agitations have been the more common and earlier ways of the participation of women in politics. The anti-price rise agitation in Bombay in 1972 witnessed widespread participation of women. These have been well chronicled for us by Mrinal Gore, Nandita Gandhi, Usha Mehta and Usha Thakkar. In the next years we have witnessed many such movements like the J.P. Movement, anti-communal agitations, anti/pro-reservation agitations, etc. It would be, however, worthy of women's participation if they could have, in the course of the agitations and struggles at least, paid

attention to the women's issues, the rights of women as women and taken specific steps to facilitate increasing participation of women both as members as well as at the decision making levels. It is also possible, as Sujata Patel points out, that there may be times when the interests and rights of women may clash with the objective and methodology of the wider movements. What should be the attitude and policy direction of the participating women or the wider women's movement and organisations at such times? It has been the experience of any number of politically active women that at such times, the women question is totally subordinated to the wider question - ideological or power oriented it may be. All the political parties are guilty of such a sacrifice of women's issues and perceptions; to them participation of women is secondary, dispensable and opportunistic and has to be reconciled with the interests of the party. No wonder Chhaya Datar goes hammer and tongs at them for neglecting the mobilisation and organisation of women on their special issues. Her attack is particularly against the Left Parties which in the seventies seemed to have specially opposed the feminist perspective.

The parties have, since then, moved much further by way of mobilisation of women, organisation of party wings as well as articulation of women's issues. However, the basic critique is still valid viz. <sup>conclusion</sup> women's issues and women's participation are encouraged only within certain parameters and are constrained by the basic objectives and interests of the parties, that being the capturing of political power and survival of the government, once captured. A deeper empathy and gender sensitisation of politicians, political institutions, and in general in the public life, are woefully lacking. Women's participation and rights, thereby, move one step forward and two steps backward. Real gender equality, justice and rights are still a far cry.