

## Underrepresentation! The Saga Continues...

**Prof. Steven Lobo**

Assistant Professor


Ramniranjan Jhunjhunwala College

Address: 203, Shree Ram CHS Ltd, Jeri Meri Road, Off Marve Road,  
Near Malwani Church, Malad (W), Mumbai 400 095.

[stevaglobo71@yahoo.com](mailto:stevaglobo71@yahoo.com)

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### Abstract

  
Principal  
Ramniranjan Jhunjhunwala College,  
Ghatkopar (W), Mumbai-400086.

*Books and articles have been written, but history only continues in telling us the dilemma that it faces! Discourses, Seminars, Workshops, Conferences and the like are organized but the fate of women still remains the same! It is seen in the representation of women in the political arena today. Yes, there is a difference in that, earlier lesser women were visible, now there are more. A ray of hope is seen in the Reservation Bill, but there are arguments and counter arguments put forth to deal with the issue. When half the population is women, it is only right and deserving that there should be more women represented in the Parliament and Assemblies.*

**Keywords:** Women, Reservation, Representation, Empowerment, Participation

Women have always been portrayed by the media as meek, humble, vulnerable, docile and unquestioning. This is a typical sexual stereotype that is portrayed and fixated in the minds of the audience. Often it is done to emboss this image of a woman in the mind of society. She is bracketed into a frame and she isn't supposed to jump out of it. To add to the list of vulnerabilities, she is also portrayed as someone who is incapable of solving problems, being dependent, less intelligent, has no role as an economic contributor either to the family or society, can easily be used as a tool and has no political participation.

On the one hand, we have an image of woman being portrayed as a goddess, and on the other as one who is totally exploited, who can't express her opinion or exert her will on others. Such a paradox tends to misguide the mentality of a society that is wanting to bring in changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Women are subjugated through violence. There are quite a few women who are leaders in the community at the grassroots and are also strong advocates of environment and peace, but there are very few who are recognized for their efforts. The winds of change in the world are affecting women and children the most (Rao, 2011).

Women have faced discrimination right from their childhood. They weren't given access to food, education and proper health facilities. As grownups, they have faced discrimination in

the form of inability to choose their own groom, not allowed to work in the formal sector, suffering because of being a liability due to dowry, torture in the husband's home because she is an outsider, consigned to the home to do housework, being blamed for all the wrong that happens, facing physical abuse including marital rape, economic exploitation, mental torture, etc. The problems of women differ even in the sub-sectional areas of society (Teltumbde, 2010).

Historically, Hindu mythology depicts the status of women during the Vedic period as honourable and respectable. They had the freedom to move about in fairs, festivals and assemblies. During the post-Vedic period they lost their independence. They needed protection! Protection by her father in her childhood, husband in her young age, and son in her old age. Woman was treated as emotional and less rational as compared with man. Man was responsible for hard work, earned daily bread, and woman had to do the household duties. During the Mughal period, the purdah system was introduced and child-marriage became prevalent. Lack of education, early marriage, no employment opportunities, no property rights, sati practice, no widow remarriage, etc. led to inequality of the sexes in the socio-economic fields. It is only during the British rule in India that certain legislations were passed to remove some of these social evils (Gupta, 2010).

The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal saw the beginning of women participating in nationalist activities. Middle class nationalist women contributed their own mite and boycotted foreign goods. Several eminent women came to the forefront to get women organized. The movement for independence also saw the rise of the demand for women's suffrage. The All India Women's Conference brought in the question of women's suffrage. Sarojini Naidu was instrumental in passing a resolution to support women's franchise and also became the first Indian woman to become the elected President of the Indian National Congress. The first time that the issue of representation of women in politics was raised was in 1917. By 1930 women had gained the Right to Vote, which initially was bestowed only on women from elite families (Chary, 2012). It is the Constitution of India that finally gave women equal rights with men in universal adult franchise.

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century women started demanding for their rights and their due place in society. They wanted to be part of politics, developmental programmes, movements, etc. It was a great challenge to patriarchy. They are coming out of their closets and expressing their demands for freedom and dignified existence. No more are they to be taken for granted. It is argued that if women are given place in political structures they will change the political discourse and bring new dimensions to the fore. Not that they will not face problems like their male counterparts, but women's issues will be found on the agenda and political culture itself will be changed (Panda, 2008).

There is really no serious examination of the problems faced by women. Women have a major role to play in development. All development strategy that does not enhance the role

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of women cannot lead to comprehensive socio-economic and political development. Today women are trying to understand their position in society. By empowerment, women would be able to develop self-esteem, confidence, realize their potential and enhance their collective bargaining power (Rao, 2012).

Though women are large in number, they occupy a marginalized position in India due to several socio-economic constraints. Social evils like sati practice, dowry deaths, polygamy, child-marriage, female foeticide, female infanticide, prostitution, rape, eve teasing, etc. have not been uprooted completely. This has obviously not allowed them to effectively participate in the political processes and institutional structures of democracy. Attitudes towards women at home, society, male domination, caste, religion, etc. have all been hindrances to her coming out and being an equal participant with her male counterpart (Panda, 2008).

With the declining sex ratio in India it is evident that women have still a long way to go when it comes to equality and equal treatment. Even the literacy rate is not very encouraging. This reflects the low social position of women in Indian society. Kerala is one state which has a very high female literacy rate, and the social set-up is also very conducive to have active political participation of women. The other side of the same story is the state of Rajasthan, where the literacy rate of women is very low, and so is their political participation (Dhavan, 2008).

One way that liberation can be brought about among women is through their participation. Women's participation covers a range of activities like movements, protest meetings, pressure tactics, etc. Participation gives them a sense of dignity and value. It has three roles, namely, educative, integrative and empowering (Panda, 2008). It is a known fact that the mother is the first teacher. Her role in the education of her children has been very foundational, not just academically, but in the development of their overall personality. She integrates the entire family and is the source of empowerment among her family members. There can be no greater role in the family than that of the mother.

In spite of this, India cuts a sorry picture in the world. India has slipped four places on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap index to 112, behind China, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh due to rising disparity with reference to women's health and participation in the economy. However, India is now ranked in the bottom five in terms of women's health and survival and economic participation. The World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index ranks countries according to calculated gender gap between women and men in four key areas: health, education, economy and politics.

If we ignore the problems of women in society, then there is one aspect that needs to be considered, and that is one of a citizen. A citizen enjoys rights according to the Constitution. She has been conveniently sidelined and the patriarchy doesn't seem to be interested in knowing about the rights she enjoys. Social exclusion occurs when a group of people is

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excluded from rights. These rights include the right to participate in society. Affirmative or positive action is an important policy which is adopted in India to include all members of excluded communities. This affirmative programme helps in overcoming the effects of discrimination against groups that have taken place in the past. It creates conditions for all to participate effectively in taking decisions and realizing all aspects of rights in every sphere of life. In the sphere of employment, affirmative action helps in undertaking proactive measures to create a work environment which is non-discriminatory, and as a public policy it is the response of the government to resolve the problem of discrimination and is closely linked with the political process. The government would take concrete steps to include affirmative action into its policies in order to remove the discrimination that existed in the past.

Affirmative action is based on the fundamental right of 'Right to Equality', even though it sounds like a paradox. It is the basis of equality of opportunity being provided to every citizen, who shall have the right to equal access to his/her self-development. The main aim of this is to treat unequals as equals and thus promote equality. The programmes of affirmative action can be found during the British period in India. It is part of the welfare measures of the country to ensure that every citizen has equal access to welfare for himself/herself. The concept of equality and social justice are foundational aspects in India's constitution. Article 14, which is a fundamental right, ensures that the State will not deny anyone equality before law or equal protection of the laws within India. At the same time it also makes an exception wherein the State will not be prevented from promoting affirmative action programmes which will help in the advancement of those who have been treated unequally (Chhetri, 2012).

A purest form of democracy, according to J. S. Mill is one wherein the government is of the whole body, by the whole people, and equally represented. The goal of democracy will be obtained only if people from all sections of society are involved in decision-making (Chhetri, 2012). The goal of obtaining equality among women and men cannot be achieved if one half of the population of the country is consistently excluded from taking part in the decision-making process. In order to overcome the imbalances in gender the Constitution of India has enshrined principles which encounter discriminatory practices. There are several laws which deal with these discriminatory practices ranging from economic, social to political (Chhetri, 2012). For women to be participants in public life it is important that they are given opportunities in decision-making that affect society at large. Of course, the problem of under representation of women in decision-making in democracies persists all over the world. India, however, though it has had a glorious tradition of giving women their rightful place in society, over time has fallen in its glory. Today we find not more than 12% of women in the political arena.

Women have been underrepresented in the politics. There has been a strong resistance from men to restrict the large entry of women into politics. Men feel that women are not trained in politics. As if men were better qualified! The argument could tilt in favour of women as

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they are homemakers. They think in terms of family and in the larger interests of society. Men are worried that women would become decision-makers after tasting power. They are apprehensive of the role of women in this area. This fear has led them to stall the Bill for Reservation of Women in Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution in 1992 were a blessing for women who wanted to contest elections. The purpose of the Acts was to give a constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions and municipalities across the country to make sure that equal access was granted, and there would be increased participation of people in all categories including women. One third of the seats are reserved for women, filled by direct election. One-third of the seats are reserved for women for the office of the Chairperson in the panchayats and municipalities. This led to political empowerment of women in society. As a result of this provision lakhs of women today occupy positions as members and chairpersons of the grassroot institutions in India (Chhetri, 2012).

An unfortunate part of the 33% reservation for women in local self-government is that before implementing it there was no nationwide discussion on it. It was hypocritical of political parties to not have discussed it among themselves. A reason given as to why the reservation at the local level passed smoothly is that it was a populist move to woo the electorate in those areas which did not concern the MPs and the MLAs. However, when it comes to reservation for women in State Assemblies and the Lok Sabha, it is a direct threat of survival to the same MPs and MLAs. If women enter the political arena in large numbers it will certainly change the face of Indian politics. There will be values, preferences and perspectives added to politics. There is no consensus on the issue, as some women feel otherwise and most men feel the same (Nanivadekar, 1998). What needs to be noted is that women are mothers, sisters, wives and mothers. They are connected in some way or the other to men. Why will they administer in such a way that would go against men when there is a direct connect with them? Whatever policies that will be implemented will benefit the whole society at large. This aspect is being forgotten or deliberately ignored because bastions of power are set to be lost due to reservations. What was once belonging to someone has become one's own prized possession. To lose it becomes egoistic and a matter of shame.

Giving women equal representation or reservation in a certain proportion, does it mean that they make a difference to politics? Are they different as legislators as compared with men? Are they passive representatives by just being in office, or active representatives, working for women and their interests? Research in the west has shown that women representatives were more concerned with prevention, whereas men were stricter in their response by suggesting sentences. Women were more likely to talk of the possibility of rehabilitation than were men. Research also shows that women are as effective as men in getting their bills turned into law. This is more so when the bills are directly concerned with women, children and families. It has also been found that women view social problems differently than men, which leads them to propose different types of legislation. They also tend to be more collaborative in their

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leadership styles than men do. When it comes to policy making, women are able to leave a very distinct mark on policies when they are more of them in the legislature (Paxton, 2007).

There is a change in perception of women from the viewpoint of development. Today they are being looked at from the perspective of empowerment. This has weightage today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when the gap between men and women voters is continuously decreasing. In fact some states in India have shown more number of women voter turnouts than men. The more developed states show more activism by women and the backward states are the ones that show lower participation and mobilization of women (Parida, 2009).

Such a situation cannot be remedied by introducing reservation alone. It is absolutely desirable to have women in positions of power as they could bring about the changes needed in society. Their perspective, approach and way of dealing with situations would be very different from men because of their positions in families. However, if their being in legislative bodies through reservation is going to be superficial and the traditional power structure is going to be reinforced, then the whole aspect of reservation should be thought about once again.

Some women feel that reservation for them is a humiliating way of doling away positions. They have to prove their worth. It would be better to have competition with men. However, others do not feel so. Reservations would only give them their rightful place. It will strengthen governance and women will stand for women (Rao, 2011). But this doesn't mean that there should be a disadvantage for women. If women are being given a role in politics, it does not mean that they can be used as proxies for their husbands, who were earlier representatives in the constituency which has now been reserved for women.

Some women would act as proxy to their male benefactors with political lineages, money and muscle power. The problem is not so much as to settle the matter with legislation, as much as it is a matter of changing the attitude of society. This change can be brought about more effectively through an efficient administration. Hence, it makes more sense, to improve the situation of women by inculcating gender sensitivity among the administrative cadres and making them more accountable.

Some arguments in favour of reservations for women are: political parties were reluctant to sponsor women candidates due to their patriarchal character; hence it was necessary to have reservations. It would increase the number of women in Parliament suddenly and would act as a strong lobby. Since they are a minority at the moment, they cannot effectively participate in the interests of women. And more women being in Parliament would lead to a change in debates and policy matters. The arguments against reservations are: This would be against the principle of equality as mentioned in the Constitution. Women should not be equated to socially backward communities because they are not a socially homogeneous

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group. Their interests are not isolated from that of others. Other communities and groups would make similar demands (Menon, 2000).

To conclude, it should be noted that women cannot be ignored at any stage. They constitute 50% of the population. It is a blot on society when it does not recognize the contribution of half of its population. Looking back at our history, women have been held in high esteem. Their work has been recognized and they are a force to reckon with. It is the patriarchal system that has eroded our thinking and stagnated our society. One may wonder why women have been left behind when they have nurtured the entire society. Woman is like mother nature. You cannot do without her. She has her place and it needs to be upheld with dignity. There are glorious moments in humankind where women have been protectors too. Certain sections of the male society have conveniently ignored the contributions of women. It is through reservations for her in the political sphere that she can find her due and rightful place. This policy of reservation is not just for her due place but to put her at the helm of affairs so that society can be a better place to live. At least all will have their due share, as a mother does to her family!

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**Principal**  
**Ramniranjan Jhunjhunwala College,**  
**Ghatkopar (W), Mumbai-400086.**