

Election expectations: Is women's status satisfactory?



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India with 47.1 crore women voters is set for the 18th parliamentary elections. Women voters are a major force to reckon with in electoral politics; so powerful are they that no political party can afford to dispense with them. But ironically, it seems that the percentage of women candidates in the elections does not go beyond 15 per cent. Political leaders have been harping on women's political representation. But this question will get properly addressed only when it gets importance in the non-election days.

Incomplete schemes

In human history, right from the days men-led governments were in vogue, women have been losing all things ranging from leadership and personality to human rights. It is only in the last two centuries that various countries and governments have been taking measures to reverse this anti-woman trend. On the one hand, there have been global organizations such as the United Nations and on other, there have been various social movements in India; it is these outfits which have been a major trigger for the Indian government to draw up and implement schemes for women.

Despite these external pressures, what is more significant is the ideology of the party that captures power and forms government. Women should look into the fact that their rights are crushed and oppressed in the countries helmed by religious fundamentalist governments. As far as India is concerned, the measures taken by the BJP government in the last decade for women's development, women empowerment, women's security and equal respect for women are fewer. Schemes such as 'Let us protect girl child and teach,' 'One-stop center,' Women's emergency No. 181 and so on were brought in to increase women's birth rate and provide security to them from sexual harassment. Of course, thanks to these

schemes, women's birth rate has marginally increased. But atrocities perpetrated on women have multiplied to a large extent, says a BBC report.

Can we put behind us the Asifa Bano case? More than the actual injustice done to the hapless girl, what is more shocking was the way the perpetrators of the crime were celebrated. It is an indelible scar on the Indian consciousness that sexual violence was committed on the female wrestlers and their painful struggles were treated nonchalantly and insolently. The humiliation of the Manipur women paraded naked has been engraved in our hearts like a wound.

Schemes and results

Schemes such as Skill Mission India, Stand Up India and so on have been brought in to augment women's role in factories and corporate companies. The rule that women should mandatorily be made members of corporate boards was introduced under the Congress regime itself. It was a pioneering scheme at the global level. But, on the flip side, there is no transparency in the way these schemes for women are implemented. The BJP government, for its part, has entrusted the implementation of the laws and schemes for women to private companies where things have turned into the customary male-oriented industrial tropes. Therefore, though the laws have a pro-woman face, they could not make a remarkable impact with regard to women's development. The result is the prevailing social gender discrimination and difference. It is interesting to note that India holds the 127th slot in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023.

Controversial initiatives

Except the anti-human trafficking law introduced in 2018, the BJP government has not enacted any law for women. Of course, it proposed an amendment to enhance women's age of marriage to 21. But the move was put on hold following the opposition parties' objection. Besides, though the Supreme Court had delivered a verdict favouring women's entry into the Sabarimala temple, the government set up a committee to invalidate the effect of the court judgment. It is, of course, welcome that the BJP government has passed the law for women's reservation. But the law has unnecessarily been linked with the constituency delimitation exercise so much so that it will face complications even in the 2029 elections. The time-limit for women's reservation has been set as 15 years. Thus it is manifest that the rulers themselves are not so interested in the very law they pass for women's progress.

Meanwhile, the BJP government in Uttarakhand has passed the uniform civil code which leaves it to the father of a family to give or deny a share in the ancestral property to girl children. In fact, it boils down to denial of property rights to women. Moreover, this law has brought into the purview of marriage the system of 'living together' which actually follows no wedding rituals. The law clearly reveals its interference and dominance in personal human relationships (it dictates terms on who can marry whom in families, giving out a list of relations prohibited from marriage). In the future, this law will be implemented across the country, says the BJP. On the pretext of abolishing the Muslim 'talaq' system, the government has incorporated the legal punishment into the wedding law provisions. All these measures will cause confusion in the future society when women may have to bear the brunt of all these things.

Women's representation

It feels happy to note that women are appointed as Finance Minister and the President. But the approach of political parties, particularly the BJP, is not satisfactory when it comes to the number of women candidates fielded in the electoral fray. To state the truth, the prominent parties have neither an ideology nor an action plan for women's liberation. We don't say 'no' to the representation women get in the male-oriented structures. Women's representation is, in fact, a must. But as the feminists in the early stage had pointed out, the truth that needs to be understood is that when we take up the tools of our masters, the tools will not work against them. That is why India, despite having a woman as the Finance Minister, holds the 127th slot in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023.

At the same time, parties fielding more women candidates in the elections cannot be considered as having a pro-woman outlook. Yet it is our duty to bring to light the fact that big parties having winning prospects have only a lesser number of women candidates.

Demands

A law must be enacted to implement 50 per cent reservation for women in Parliament and Assemblies. Women's Commissions should not be mere namesake commissions. They must fully be re-structured and empowered to the teeth in order to function so effectively that even the last woman in the country is fully aware of it. Abortion should be made a woman's special right and privilege. Law must be introduced to abolish gender discrimination. Exclusive budget for women is a must. Sufficient measures must be taken to ensure augmentation of women's representation in industrial enterprises.

Politicians would do well to remember that it is the countries where women live enjoying full liberty and rights, which can lead and guide the world.

Translated by V Mariappan.