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Electoral Politics and Women: With a Special Reference to Manipur, India

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Abstract

An election is a formal decision making process by which a population chooses an individual to hold public office. Regular election serves to hold leaders accountable for their performance and permit an exchange of influence between the governor and the governed. As a result of the male dominated socio political structure, women are not getting proper space in the electoral politics of Manipur as a part of the Indian union. In almost all the elections, parliamentary as well as state legislative assembly, women voter outnumbered male voters in the state of Manipur. But upto 1990 no woman MLA was elected in Manipur. They have been contesting the election through different political parties and as independent candidates. But the rate of political participation is so high in the state. This small paper is an attempt to discuss about the value of electoral politics in a democratic country and the real position of women in the electoral politics of Manipur along with their nature of political participation.

Key Words: Democracy, discrimination, election, government, participation.

Introduction

A successful democracy requires a participant society in which power is shared and authoritative decisions are made by representatives of all the people in that society. Modern democratic models did not develop theoretically in most of the third world countries. Indian democracy too, unfortunately, lacks the effective participation of all its citizens. The structure of political life for the ordinary women has largely remained hidden in the private sphere. Many feminists feel that democracy has failed to recognize women as political citizens in its theory and practice, and it has been more rewarding towards men than women. One important issue that challenges the existing romanticized understanding of empowered Manipuri women comes from the fact that women continue to be either silenced or deprived in terms of political representation. While historical legacies promise a fertile environment for women's participation in the modern representative form of politics, women's role is negligible other than exercising their periodic franchise. Present prevailing patriarchal social structure do not encourage women to be active in electoral politics. Constitutionally and legally, no barrier exists in women having equality with men, special laws to protect women from most of the socially degrading customs have been enacted and enforced. In spite of all these, the long established belief and notion about female inferiority and social prescription and prohibitions built around them have proved a hard nut to crack and as a result, women find it difficult to use the existing facilities to remove the hindrances of equality.

Scope and methodology

This small paper is mainly dealing with the electoral and political participation of women related with the whole political system. It involves the studies of political science, public administration, sociology, economics, law etc.

Both primary and secondary data are used for this paper. Primary data are collected through interview method based on the fixed question to the relevant persons. Books, journals magazines, records, memos etc are used as the secondary data for this paper. Generalization of this paper is made through induction method. Psycho-sociological approach is employed for this paper.

Objectives: The main objectives of the paper are:

1. To study about the value of electoral politics in a democratic country ;
2. To analyse the real position of women in the electoral politics of Manipur, as a part of the Indian union;
3. To highlight the real nature of the political participation of women in a genderised society, particularly in Manipur.

Social Factors and Electoral Behaviour

Due to the paternalistic family and male dominated political structures which do not provide space for women in decision making bodies. Politics is essentially an art of acquiring and exercising power- the power to effectively influence the decision making processes and policies and implementing desired changes. With a strict patriarchal psyche, decisions are meant to be taken by men and followed by women. They are expected to tow the line made by men. Qualities such as rationality, self discipline, competition, universality are considered to be important for political participation, which are considered to be in abundance in the males. On the contrary, women are associated with qualities like docile, submissiveness, protected etc. This gender stereotype leads to the marginalization of women in the political arena as they are advised to keep away from politics and play only feminine and non-competitive roles. Indian culture assigns the women the responsibility of primarily parenting and nurturing- accordingly, developed a psychological make up and choose the role of ‘care giver’ and prefer to confine them to the private sphere i.e home. The women who are keen on pursuing a career in politics enter the political sphere at a later age when they have fulfilled their responsibilities towards the family. However this creates a greater problem for them as they have to devote more energy and struggle hard in order to compete with the men who have made an early start. For the first time in the electoral history of India in many years, we see the hope of youths, brimming with energy, guided by a clutch of experienced people of great maturity and sagacity. Some important young women Congress MPs who have successes in this 15th Lok Sabha are –Mandasaur’s Meenakshi Natarajan (36), Nagaur’s Jyoti Mirdha (36), Bhiwani Mahendragarh’s Shruti Choudhri (33) and Malda North’s Mausam Noor (28)-come from different states and united by their agenda for development. The youngest MP of the 15th Lok Sabha is Agatha Sangma, 28 years, a women MP from NCP of Meghalaya. Regarding the success of women MP in the 15th Lok Sabha, intellectuals and eminent writers gave different comments. Women’s participation in local level political institutions like village panchayats and municipal bodies has also remained insignificant in spite of the government’s policy of cooption and reservation of seats for women. It is generally believed that the responsibility of establishing social, economic and political justice/equality lies in the state. The Indian states, however has failed to take adequate measures in emancipating and empowering women mainly because most individuals and/or political parties who control various organs of the state are intoxicated with patriarchal values. Moreover in the contemporary era of liberalization, privatization and disinvestments, the state has abandoned the policy of welfare. Under these circumstances, empowerment of women is possible through voluntary action at the grass root level. This is today the basic solution of women’s problems throughout the country including the North East.¹ It is true that traditionally the Meitei women’s political status as such and the scope for their formally taking part in the decision making process and in the affairs of the government as well as their rights in sharing the inheriting property did not commensurate with the vital role played by them in economic and cultural sphere. It was an eye opener with the few words of Rajeev Gandhi, Vice president AICC, during the election rally at Tumkur in Karnataka on Sunday the 16th

February 2014 'India can't be a superpower until we empower women. Wherever women are being empowered and given a chance, those states are progressing rapidly'². There may be politics of winning electoral sympathy from the public or some may even criticise as political gimmick of election times but what the statement shows is the value and credit of women as an integral part to the national growth and development. Besides, significant role that woman performs in a democratic political process of any country, which is true mainly in a developing country like India.

Political Parties and Election

An election is a formal decision making process by which people chooses an individual to hold public office. Election has been the usual mechanism by which modern representative democracy has operated. In such country, political system works through political parties. While openness and accountability are usually considered cornerstone of a democratic system, the act of casting a vote and contesting the election are usually an important stage. The political parties and groups make use of different variables for winning the battle of the ballot box. A gender gap is witnessed in contestation among the candidates during the elections. Political parties have always been reluctant to give tickets to women. They prefer to give tickets to the male candidates³. In state legislative assembly elections maximum candidates are contesting as independent candidates. During the Manipur state legislative assembly election 1984, out of total five candidates four are independent and Smt Joymati Devi of Sagolband constituency was the only party candidate (congress). In Manipur, for the Inner Manipur Parliamentary election, out of the four proposed candidates of the BJP, one women party member, O. Indira Devi is one of the hopeful candidates but the party president recommended only one male candidate who is recently retired from the service. Reason may be of different but the most important one may be gender factor. So a group of women protested in front of the party office on 19th February 2014 and they said that the matter will inform to the party president at the center.⁴ But nothing happened in their movement. The party ticket was given to the male candidate. The parties are usually against taking a risk of putting up women as candidates because of the social attitudes which disfavour women's entry into politics. Successful women candidates, numerically, are beyond the hope, because the entire game of power is generated through party organization, which is dominated by male leaders. The experience of India's sixty years periodic election shows the inability of parties to make a place for the women. Due to the smaller percentage of women, presence of women does not result in any significant changes in either the nature of women's functioning or in the party approach to women and women's issues. Before the elections the parties put forth their principles in their manifestoes, indicating their policy perspectives. The manifestoes of all political parties contain promises of taking up programmes for the welfare of women. The issues of women become one of the important topics for capturing power through election. Candidates and parties not only used the issues of women as included in their manifestoes; they are also trying to use women as a weapon for winning the battle. In Manipur, candidates of different political parties wooed the voters with different activities which have been changing from election to election. During the election 2007 and 2012, women formed self help groups under the guidance of the active workers of party candidates. With the formation of such SHGs, women can get funds but the important motives behind the screen are to woo the voters for their party candidates. As a response to such activities of the party candidate, women in group show their respect to the candidates by bringing rice, vegetable, fruits etc (so called Athenpot in Manipuri) during the public meeting. Local Meira Paibi units are the soft targets for every candidate. One critical condition in the present trend is women are coming to the voters with money on behalf of the candidates where male workers cannot enter. The maximization of the number of female voters has leaded various parties into paying greater attention to organizing the women and campaigning among them. In the past, such efforts were made only at the time of election, in the form of certain 'popularistic and opportunistic short term' promises. In accordance with the changed circumstances, the parties have established regular party forums, cells etc. for mobilising women and seeking their supports, e.g, formation of Mahila

Congress, Mahila Morcha etc. However, in the present political process of entry into decision making political institutions, there is growing influence of money and muscle power, backroom dealings, communalization and criminalization. Due to this, many women have left political parties and formed informal women's groups⁵. Even during the election, the individual woman's preferences are subdued by the choice of elders in the family, influential leaders etc. Here, one pity mindset of woman has also been witnessing that they cannot show their choice against the choice of the elder male members of the family- husband, brother, father etc, just in the form of social obligation. As women remain at the periphery of the power structure, they lack the political consciousness needed to formulate and implement policies in accordance with the aspirations of women. Their presence as a candidate and as a voter is just a mere symbolism rather than real power wielding. Indian democracy, unfortunately, lacks the effective participation of all its citizens.

Participation of Women in the Electoral Politics of Manipur

Manipur merged to the Indian Union in 1949 as a Part C State. From the beginning of the Indian Parliamentary Election, Manipur women joined in the electoral politics. In the Parliamentary and Electoral College election 1952, Manipuri women had participated as voters and candidates. Smt Iswari Devi W/o late Maharaja Bodhachandra Singh contested in the Inner Manipur Parliamentary Constituency as an Independent candidate. But she got 11,809 votes only and was not elected. She was defeated by L. Jugeshwar Shingh, who got 22,902 votes out of 75,586.⁶ M.K. Binodini Devi contested from Khurai Constituency in the Electoral College election as an All Manipur National Union candidate and she got elected after defeating her three rivals. She secured 1970 votes out of 4,659 votes polled.

In the territorial council elections, another woman Smt Sabi Devi, who played a very active part in the women's movement of 1939, contested as a communist candidate from Wangkhei Kongba Constituency but was defeated. There were five candidates including her. She secured only 484 votes out of 9906 total votes' polled.⁷ Since no women were elected in the Territorial Council election the then Chief Commissioner nominated two women members in the Territorial Council to ensure women's participation under the Union Territories Act 1956. The nominated members were R.K Mukhara Devi and Akim Annal in 1957; R.K Mukhara Devi and Lhingjaneng Gangte in 1962; A. Bimola Devi and R. T. Shinny in 1967.⁸ The next Territorial Council Election was held in 1962 along with the Parliamentary Election in the Inner and Outer Manipur Constituencies. As there was no elected women member, again, Chief Commissioner of Manipur nominated R.K Mukhara Devi and Lhingjaneng Gangte as members of the Territorial Council of Manipur. In July 1963, the Territorial Council of Manipur was converted into a Union Territory. The first Assembly Election of Manipur Union Territory was held in the early part of 1967 along with the Parliamentary Election. Smt A. Bimola Devi and R.T Shinny were nominated as members and the nominees joined the Congress Party. In these elections female voters outnumber the male voters in Manipur, i.e in 1957 out of the total electorate of 330211, number of female voters were 168874. Again in 1967, out of the total 468707, only 231310 were male voters. In almost all the elections, parliamentary as well as state legislative assembly, women voters outnumbered male voters in the state of Manipur.

Table 1 shows the exact figure of male and female voter in Manipur from 1972 to 1984. Table 2 shows the female candidates along with the number of votes polled by them and the name of the political parties.

Women voter outnumbered male voter, but upto 1990 no women MLA was elected in Manipur. They have been contesting the election through different political parties and as independent candidates. The first woman elected in the Manipur State Legislative assembly was Smt Hangmila, W/O Late Yangmaso Shaiza, Ex C.M in 1990. Second was Smt K. Apabi Devi W/O K. Bira Singh, who expired in the plane crash. She was the Minister of State in Manipur. Third was W. Leima Devi

W/O W. Angou Sing, Ex M.P in 2000. Fourth and present is O. Landhoni Devi W/O O. Ibobi Singh, C.M of Manipur in 2007 from Khangabok constituency. The participation of these women in the electoral politics of Manipur is also just a shadow of their husbands. Here, I want to mean is Hangmila Shaiza of Ukhrul Constituency captured the seat of her husband as a sympathy vote after the death of Sri Yangmaso Shaiza, the former Chief Minister of Manipur. Smt Apabi Devi from Oinam constituency captured the seat of her husband when her husband Sri Bir Singh expired in plan crash as a sitting MLA. Smt W. Leima Devi got the seat of her husband when he went to the Parliament. Smt O. Landhoni Devi won the seat of her husband; Sri O. Ibobi Sing left the seat when he became the Chief Minister. A new history opened with the election result of Manipur State Legislative Assembly Election 2012. A.K Mirabai became the first women cabinet minister in the Manipur State Legislative Assembly. Nemcha Kipgen (MSCP) from Kangpokpi constituency and A.K Mirabai (Congress I) from Patsoi constituency were elected who came from the families which have no politician in their families before they were elected. In the parliamentary electoral history of Manipur only one women M.P. was elected so far (Kim Gangte). The government might have reserved 33% of the panchayat seats for women is just for namesake. In many of the women reserved panchayats, husbands or any other male members of the family in this minority dominated locality who actually run the everyday affairs on behalf of their wives or any women relatives.

Political Participation of Women

Women have an apathetic attitude towards electoral politics due to different socio-economic factors. Even though there is lesser figure in the electoral scenario, women participated in the political process through different angles. Political participation includes all the political acts through which people effected directly to the political decision making process. It includes such activities as strikes, demonstration, sit in protests, mass movements, marches, presentation of memoranda as well as violent acts design to change the political system or the unconventional political activities. In Manipur such activities are performed by the women so actively. In the history of women's movement in Manipur, mention may be made that quite a few maharanis took active part in the administration during monarchical period. The king as well as the people sometimes sought the opinion or support of the women to solve difficult problems or situations which affected the interests of the community. In the history of Manipur there were many evidences where the king took the opinion and suggestions of their maharanis in matters of public interests. Sometimes women in group gathered and complained to the king for correction, if he acted unruly and done any injustice⁹. As a matter of fact, the position of women is just in a puzzle situation. They are very active in social life, but they are not in decision making. They organized different movements, giving pressure to the government, and non-governmental organizations too. Their way of agitationist movement is quite typical in certain occasions. But they are not available or hardly available in the position of leadership in general¹⁰. Sharmila Chanu, Iron Lady has been fasting against the Armed Forces Special Power Act for the last more than twelve years. There are millions of young girls who languish as they don't have the key to open the door of opportunities for progress.

Conclusion

Although the policies and programmes of the Government seem to be quite useful and effective on papers, the government must take necessary steps to implement these policies at the grass root levels. The implementing authorities or officials are to be made

accountable for every action they take. Because, in spite of all the efforts made by the political decision makers, the long established beliefs and notions about female inferiority and the social prescription and prohibitions build around them have proved a hard nut to crack and as a result, women find it difficult to use the existing facilities to remove the hindrances of equality. A bill on women reservation of seat is also lying in the Parliament. The political equality guaranteed by the democratic constitutions in the form of fundamental rights, political rights etc. is not able to penetrate deeply in the social roots in spite of many policies and programmes of the government. The women should not be let to believe that political activity is inappropriate for her. This change in the psyche of women would definitely affect the women's interest in politics and public affairs resulting in a change in the level of political participation of women. In the social life the bias against women and girl child has to be fought by social movements and by ensuring freedom to women from the oppressive social codes. Both men and women will have to work together in this direction so that human resources are not wasted or exploited by the brutal forces.

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Table1: Male and female voter in Manipur from 1972 to 1984

[1] Year	[2] Male	[3] Female	[4] Total
[5] 1972	[6] 2,87,563	[7] 3,08,279	[8] 5,95,842
[9] 1974	[10] 3,57,142	[11] 3,62,982	[12] 7,20,124
[13] 1980	[14] 4,37,620	[15] 4,71,650	[16] 9,09,262
[17] 1984	[18] 5,09,308	[19] 5,04,370	[20] 10,13,678

Source: Office file, Election Office, Lamphel Pat Imphal

Table -2: Female candidates ,the number of votes polled by them and the name of the political parties

[21] Sl.no.	[22] Name of the women candidate	[23] Party	[24] Year	[25] Constituency	[26] Votes polled
[27] 1	[28] R. K. Mukhara Devi	[29] Congress	[30] 1972	[31] Keisamthong	[32] 1655
[33] 2	[34] A. Bimola Devi	[35] MPP	[36] 1972	[37] Kontha	[38] 1301
[39] 3	[40] Lhingjaneng Gangte	[41] Congress	[42] 1972	[43] Henglep	[44] 3177
[45] 4	[46] A. Bimola Devi	[47] MPP	[48] 1973	[49] Heingang	[50] 2859
[51] 5	[52] Lhingjaneng Gangte	[53] Congress	[54] 1973	[55] Saikot	[56] 2590
[57] 6	[58] T. Kholly	[59] Independent	[60] 1973	[61] Saikot	[62] 2121
[63] 7	[64] W. Joymati Devi	[65] Congress	[66] 1980	[67] Sagolband	[68] 378
[69] 8	[70] R. K. Mukhara Devi	[71] Congress	[72] 1980	[73] Keisamthong	[74] 1381
[75] 9	[76] Kh. Bilashini Devi	[77] CPI	[78] 1980	[79] Bishnupur	[80] 1245
[81] 10	[82] M. Puinyabati Devi	[83] Congress	[84] 1980	[85] Thangmeiband	[86] 378
[87] 11	[88] A. Bimola Devi	[89] Janata Dal	[90] 1980	[91] Heingang	[92] 1947
[93] 12	[94] T. Kholly	[95] Independent	[96] 1980	[97] Saikot	[98] 2814
[99] 13	[100] Lhingjaneng	[101] Janata Dal	[102] 1980	[103] Saitu	[104] 2426
[105] 14	[106] Aribam Bimola Devi	[107] Independent	[108] 1984	[109] Heingang	[110] 1608
[111] 15	[112] W. Joymati Devi	[113] Congress	[114] 1984	[115] Sagolband	[116] 601
[117] 16	[118] N. Shyama Devi	[119] Independent	[120] 1984	[121] Lamlai	[122] 95
[123] 17	[124] Ngainu Vaiphei	[125] Independent	[126] 1984	[127] Jiribam	[128] 25
[129] 18	[130] Manlianniang	[131] Independent	[132] 1984	[133] Churachandpur	[134] 160

Source: Office file, Election Office, Lamphel Pat Imphal