

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION (A CASE STUDY OF UTTARAKHAND)

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ABSTRACT

This research paper delves into the critical aspects of women's empowerment and political participation, with a special focus on the state of Uttarakhand, India. Despite being half of the state's population, women's political participation in Uttarakhand remains limited, with male dominance prevailing in the political arena. While 50% reservation in Panchayat Raj Institutions has increased women's representation in rural local bodies, this paper highlights the marginalized role of women in state-level politics and parliamentary representation.

The research sheds light on the significant role that women have played in driving social reforms in Uttarakhand, including movements against alcoholism and forest policies. However, the paper underscores that their political participation remains constrained. It also explores the myriad challenges women face, such as lower economic status, lack of education, and the burden of domestic and professional responsibilities.

Despite these challenges, the paper emphasizes the positive impact of women's political leadership, which has been associated with reducing gender inequality and prioritizing critical social issues like health, education, and pensions. Furthermore, women's participation in decision-making is vital for creating gender-equal opportunities and gender-sensitive policies. This research underscores the need to address the barriers hindering women's political participation in Uttarakhand and highlights the potential benefits of their increased involvement in governance for achieving sustainable development and social justice. It is based on theoretical data collected from various secondary sources such as books, journals, newspapers, government websites, and UN data.

KEYWORDS: *Women's Empowerment, Political Participation, Uttarakhand, Gender Inequality, Social Reforms.*

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment encompasses the pursuit of gender equality, providing women with equal opportunities, and the freedom to nurture their personal development. The core objective of empowerment is to enable women to attain economic independence, self-sufficiency, and a strong sense of self-worth, empowering them to confront challenging situations and actively participate in decision-making processes. The Constitution of India strives to eliminate gender

disparities by outlawing discrimination based on sex and class, prohibiting human trafficking and forced labor, and reserving elected positions for women. The involvement of women in political parties is linked to the growing demand for equal rights. Despite constitutional safeguards for gender equality, only a handful of women have managed to assert their influence in legislative decision-making. Indian women have historically experienced lower status compared to men, and gender gaps persist in areas such as access to education and employment. Societal acceptance of unequal gender norms among women continues to persist.(Khanna, 2009).

In India, the level of women's involvement in politics is not as prominent as that of men, a pattern observed in many countries worldwide. Nevertheless, there has been notable progress in women's political participation when compared to the past, and it continues to strengthen. However, it's important to note that even today, women's representation in the Indian parliament falls short of being satisfactory, as they struggle to secure more significant roles in legislative bodies. The empowerment of women in politics enables them to address their fundamental concerns and needs within their communities, promoting transparency, combating corruption, fostering accountability, and enhancing political dedication, leadership, and responsiveness at various levels of government, be it national, regional, district, or local. Despite women constituting more than half of the world's population, they still face challenges in accessing political decision-making processes compared to their male counterparts at all levels of government. Therefore, achieving equal participation of women in politics and decision-making is essential for promoting fairness and democracy.(Women Empowerment in India: A Study of Uttarakhand, 2016)

“For me, a better democracy is a democracy where women do not only have the right to vote and elect but to be elected” rightly said Michele Bachelet (Head of UN Women, First female President of Chile).

Women's empowerment and political participation are key elements in smoothly running a democratic society. No society reaches its zenith, when half of its population is disregarded and discriminated against. Women's demand for equal political participation is a global phenomenon. In India, after the long suppression of women in the medieval period, the freedom movement and independent constitution gave hope for their better position in society in all aspects. Although the Constitution provided equal rights to men and women in all socioeconomic and political aspects, women are still struggling to achieve equal status in all aspects. Although gradual changes have been observed, much remains to be done. This situation worsens in places with scarce resources, a tough climate, and inaccessibility.

Uttarakhand is a state of the Indian Union. It was formed on November 9, 2000, and was the 27th state of India when it was carved out of northern Uttar Pradesh. Although called a new state by various political scientists, Uttarakhand has seen a fair share of political upheaval. The state was formed by a protest for separate statehood, but it seems to have neglected half of the state's population—that is, females. Females constituted 49.06% of the population(Thapliyal, Women Leadership and Development: A Study on Grassroots Women Leaders in Uttarakhand, 2017).

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Poverty and the daily struggle to make a living in the hilly terrain have become a prevailing reality for most rural inhabitants in Uttarakhand. The typical village in this region consists of a

collection of houses nestled amidst terraced fields. The transformation brought about by deforestation and the shift towards a money-based economy has profoundly disrupted the traditional communities in Uttarakhand. A significant consequence of this transformation is the substantial emigration of men seeking work in the plains or the armed forces, resulting in an imbalance in the region's demographics. While urban areas are predominantly inhabited by men, the interior rural districts of Uttarakhand stand out in India for having a notable majority of female residents.(Rawat, 2004)

Aside from the shift from a subsistence-based hill economy to a cash-driven one, the emigration of men has given rise to various social and psychological challenges for women living in hilly areas. Owing to deep-seated social customs and traditions, women often experience mistreatment from their family members, and in some cases, this mistreatment becomes so severe that it has resulted in instances of women resorting to suicide. The depletion of India's forest cover is particularly pronounced in the Himalayan region. Consequently, hill women have disproportionately shouldered the burden of the modern encroachment on their natural resources and livelihoods. The increased time they now spend gathering water, fuelwood, and fodder has added significant hardships to their already challenging lives. According to (Nautiyal, 2003), despite the existence of numerous programs aimed at promoting women's well-being, education, and economic advancement, women in the hilly regions not only lack access to essential resources for an improved quality of life but also frequently find themselves excluded from the broader development efforts. When we assess societal attitudes towards women as a whole, it becomes apparent that their fundamental requirements and ambitions are frequently disregarded. (Negi, 2011). Women were excluded from the decision-making process because of their poor social status. As a result, development has failed to bring about significant changes in the quality of life of women in the most remote areas of the hilly region. There is very little understanding of the basic needs of hill women, and there is no appropriate strategy to give them an equitable share of the fruits of development.

Women's Role In Social Reforms In Uttarakhand

Remarkably, despite the challenges posed by disparities, gender prejudices, and their lower societal status, the women of Uttarakhand have actively contributed to addressing some of the region's social issues. In the 1960s, activists initiated the formation of women's self-help groups to combat alcoholism, a prevalent social problem. Alcohol abuse, a significant concern for many rural women, prompted their engagement in these campaigns. Eventually, their efforts proved successful in prohibiting alcohol consumption in five districts of what was then Uttar Pradesh by 1971. Moreover, their strong environmental awareness and affinity for nature led to the renowned Chipko Movement, where underprivileged rural women took the lead and protested against the government's forest policies.

The 1990s witnessed another resurgence as the lack of development in Uttarakhand gave rise to a movement demanding the region's recognition as a separate state. Women played a pivotal role in this movement, ultimately leading to the establishment of the state of Uttarakhand.

Women's Political Participation In Uttarakhand

With women comprising half of the state's population, their political participation is diminutive. Due to the upscale migration of men, the larger population of the villages consists of females.

Even after 20 years of the state's formation, the political participation of females is relatively limited.

While the 50% reservation for women in Panchayat Raj Institutions has indeed increased women's representation in rural local governance, a closer look at state-level politics and parliamentary representation reveals the continued underrepresentation of women in key decision-making bodies. According to Dr. Annapurna Nautiyal, a professor of political science at HNB Garhwal University, it is undeniable that the 50% reservation for women in Panchayat elections has enhanced their political awareness and self-confidence. However, political parties have not granted them a proportionate number of tickets to contest in assembly elections.

From the first state legislative assembly elections of 2002 to 2017, there were no more than five elected representatives.

The politics of the state are male-dominated, and credit goes to the few who participate in it against all odds. Even a large proportion of female candidates come from political or affluent backgrounds. Ritu Khanduri (MLA from Kotdwar constituency and present speaker of state assembly) is the daughter of former chief minister BC Khanduri, Anupama Rawat (MLA from Haridwar rural seat) daughter of former chief minister Harish Rawat, Mamta Rakesh, wife of former transport minister Late Kumar Rakesh.

Women Voters

The voting percentage of women in state legislative assembly elections signifies that they have played a crucial role as majority voters. The vote percentage has significantly surpassed that of males over the years.

Even after that, females from Uttarakhand played a crucial role in the state's political arena, but have been limited to being pictured as a vote bank. Although they are the backbone of the socioeconomic structure of Uttarakhand and have a strenuous lifestyle, they succumb to social and psychological indifferences because of their gender. The migration of the male population forces women to shoulder the responsibility for agriculture as well as domestic work. Thus, they should be at the forefront of social and political development but are not given ample opportunities. As a major source of income, agriculture remains primitive and ecologically unsustainable, leaving unfruitful agriculture in the hands of women with household responsibilities.

Factors Affecting Political Participation Of Women In Uttarakhand

Research published on the participation of women in panchayati raj (where seats are reserved for women candidates) in a traditional Kumaoni society revealed several factors hindering the political participation of women came to light. Socio-economic obstacles

1. Lower economic status: In the survey, it was found that the majority of respondents belonged to lower-income groups. The females were engaged in informal and unproductive agriculture. The females are not capable of covering the number of their election campaigns.
2. Lack of knowledge: Because of total or partial illiteracy or less education, women are unaware of political participation. Thus, they remained unaware of their roles, rights in development, and welfare activities.

3. The dual burden of domestic tasks and professional responsibilities -Women in the survey work were found to be engaged in multiple household activities, from working in fields and forests to processing agricultural produce at home tending animals, fetching and carrying fuel, fodder, and water working as laborers and maids in houses.

Ideological and Psychological obstacles

- Women's perception of politics as a dirty game
- Male chauvinist thinking
- Traditional & cultural barriers. (singh, 2019)

Another study conducted in the Kumaon division of Uttarakhand pointed out the following facts.

- Political parties pay the least attention to rural women because they know that at the family level, it is the male who decides to vote for females just following it without any argument.
- Less than 1/3 of women are aware of political parties.
- Of the elected women members in the village bodies, only one-fifth take an active part in the proceedings.
- Access to sources of information is very poor
- Poor accessibility, lack of information, and less importance given to women by political awareness among rural women. (Dube, 2013)

Positive Aspects Of women's Participation

Women's political leadership has been shown to have several societal benefits, such as inequality reduction and increased prioritization of social issues, such as health, education, parental love, and pension. In addition, women's political participation is particularly influential in their communities. A 2012 study conducted in India explained that the increased proportion of women village leaders had closed the "aspiration gap" between girls and boys by nearly 25%, which eventually reversed the gender gap in educational outcomes. Girls have also begun spending less time on household activities in areas with increased women's leadership in the village. (Lori Beaman, 2012)

The involvement of women in decision-making processes is crucial for ensuring that their interests are considered in governance. Particularly in local administrations, women's participation is indispensable for fostering gender equality and crafting policies that are attuned to gender-specific needs. Because women possess distinct perspectives and requirements regarding social and political matters, it is imperative to engage them in government roles to encompass a comprehensive range of societal viewpoints in the policy and decision-making arena. Given their active engagement in both household and community affairs, women possess a deep understanding of the actual challenges faced by the general populace. This firsthand knowledge equips them with insights and perspectives that can play a pivotal role in achieving sustainable development on a broader scale. (ESCAP, 2019)

CONCLUSION

Uttarakhand has been a witness to various movements spanning several decades, including the anti-alcohol movement, the Chipko movement, opposition to mining and quarrying, campaigns for regional autonomy, and numerous region-specific, albeit lesser-known movements. A unique aspect of these movements is the substantial participation of women. Women's involvement in political actions has a longstanding history in India, and Uttarakhand distinguishes itself as one of the rare regions where women have made a significant impact in these movements. Their active engagement broadened the scope of these movements, introducing concerns that melded traditional values with a contemporary outlook. Although they have played an upfront role in social and political issues, their concerns are still fighting for recognition. The political process has not hugged them back, and they are still awaiting robust representation in the state assembly as well as parliamentary elections. Since its formation only three women have been elected to the Lok Sabha, all from influential families. No party has awarded more than 12% of tickets to women candidates in the 2022 assembly elections, leaving a dying hope for the growth of women's representation in the state. Thus, the state and its people should encourage women's participation at a place where they have shown their credibility in eradicating various social evils and played a poignant role in the state movements and other social reforms.

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