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## Gender Egalitarianism; A Mirage in the Indian Parliamentary Democracy, Story of a 'Model State'

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### Abstract

Women's participation in the democratic process has largely confined to the casting of vote in the elections even after 70 years of independence of India. Taking part in the electoral politics to the upper level of democracy is still a forbidden fruit for the women. This paper aims to discuss about the events of women's reservation bill and the failure of Kerala Model in empowering women politics since independence.

Keywords: Congress, CPI (M), Constituency, Assembly, Women, Reservation

### Introduction

On September 20, 2017, 21 years had passed since the first women's reservation bill was introduced in the Indian Parliament. Political participation of women has always been subjected to discussions and studies by the academicians and politicians as well. History gives a clear picture of a male dominated society from the past although there are a few exceptions. India has been world widely known as the largest democracy on earth but yet it has not formed into its fullest form. The stubbornness of the astute politicians has been a huge obstacle for the passage of the bill. Equality of women in the parliamentary democracy remains as an unrealistic hope for the women in India.

The country can boast of a fully democratic system only on the day when it fulfills the demand of women equality in the electoral politics. In fact the proposed bill only offers 33% seats in the legislature, not 50%. Although women comprise of almost half of the Indian population, the percentage of women's representation in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of the Indian Parliament) has not crossed 13% till date whereas in Rajya Sabha (Upper House) it has reached up to 16%. Countries such as Germany, South Africa, Argentina and New Zealand have more than 30 percent women in their parliaments. It is interesting to note that these countries do not have constitutional quota regulations in their parliaments.

The participation of women in the Indian freedom struggle is priceless and one could find many prominent women leaders in the history of freedom struggle. Apart from a number of noted women leaders, there were thousands of women who were committed to the cause of Indian freedom. Gandhi was very particular about the participation of women in the struggle. He wanted the women to come out of the kitchen and involve in the national reconstruction. The constitution of India promised the women equality and participation in the nation building. But their participation was not given much recognition after the attainment of independence, which is evident in the numerous studies regarding the women's participation in the electoral

politics since 1952. The number of women was only 15 in the Constituent Assembly itself. There has not been much progress since then.

The women who comprise of 48 percentage of the total population have only 61 women MPs representing them in Lok Sabha and 27 in Rajya Sabha. Perhaps the only good thing that happened to the women in this regard is that they were able to achieve 50 per cent reservation in the Local Self Bodies and Municipal Corporations in many of the States. The male dominated Indian politics is a big obstacle for the women on their way to reach the upper level. It is a well known fact that India has produced good number of dynamic women leaders in the past. But none of the women leaders could really help the women to achieve what they really wanted. Leaders such as Indira Gandhi, Jayalalithaa, Sonia Gandhi and Mamatha Banerjee could establish their own supremacy in politics but did little for the women empowerment as a whole. Most of the elected and nominated women MPs followed the suit. The prominent women leaders found a place of their own in political front only because of the political patronage they had. Many of the women leaders who reached the higher strata of politics were not from the grass root level.

From the time of Independence, there have been loud voices for reservation in favor of women in the legislature and some of the governments have attempted to introduce a bill and pass it. But all the attempts ended up unsuccessful, except that of the UPA-II (United Progressive Alliance led by the Congress) which could introduce the bill and pass it in the Rajya Sabha. Passing of the bill in the Lok Sabha remains as a dream for the women in India. The picture in the state legislatures is no less different. There are certain political parties that have been opposing the introduction of the bill in all these years. The number of women who got elected to the state legislatures in all over India is less when compared to the total strength of the assemblies.

#### **Kerala's failure in showing a model in Gender equality in Politics**

Kerala has been acclaimed as a model state in the international level, which came in par with many indices of the developed nations. In terms of health, education, per capita income, life style, progressive measures and social conditions etc, Kerala showed a model to the rest of the India and to perhaps the world. But such a progressive State turned its face from the issue of women's equality in power and politics. Kerala has shown very poor performance in sending its women to Legislative Assembly and the Parliament. The National Movement in the erstwhile Travancore, Kochi and Malabar had considerable number of women leaders but they either got sideline by the male leadership of the parties or they disappeared from the public sphere. The Congress party in Kerala has sent only one woman to the Lok Sabha till date, where as the Communist Parties have sent six women to the Lok Sabha and one independent women candidate had won in 1951. Only eight women have seen the steps Lok Sabha from Kerala. Rajya Sabha's case is no different from the Lok Sabha; only four women had the fortune of going to Rajya Sabha from Kerala, three from Congress and one from CPI (M).

There has been a tendency among the political parties, regardless of ideologies, to allot unwinnable constituencies for the women where the opposition party would be very strong. This trend has been evident from election results of the past. In 1957, Nafeesath Beevi , a noted woman leader of the Congress party in Kerala was given

ticket to contest in Alappuzha, which was a Communist bastion. She contested the election knowing that she would lose it. Beevi lost the election to TV Thomas, a stalwart of communist party and sitting MLA. She was made the candidate again in Alappuzha in 1960. Because of her ground level work and leadership skills, she was able to defeat TV Thomas which surprised the leadership of both the parties and even Nehru himself. Although there were six women from Congress who got elected to the assembly, none of them were inducted into the cabinet. Beevi was made the Deputy Speaker of the Assembly out of pressure and that was the first and last election she successfully contested. She was denied ticket in the next election. Since the Congress was able to win the Communist fort in the previous election many male leaders had eyed on the same constituency in the next election, thus Beevi was sidelined despite her tireless attempt to make her party flag high in the previous election. She was forced to contest from two different constituencies that were far away from Alappuzha and strong holds of opposition parties in 1967 and 1980. She has openly said that she was the victim of fight for power and male dominated politics in Congress.

Accamma Cherian who was a prominent leader of the Congress during the freedom struggle was mercilessly sidelined by the party leadership after the attainment of Independence. The party did not recognize the sacrifice she made for the nation and the fearless leadership she rendered to the struggles. She lived a life in isolation after an eventful life during the freedom struggle. In the same way Accamma's colleague Annie Mascarene too was ignored but she managed to contest as an independent candidate from Thiruvananthapuram in the first general elections and became its first MP without the help of Congress. Annie Thayyil was another example for the domination of men in the Congress party. A member of the Travancore-Cochin Assembly which was the predecessor of the State Assembly, Thayyil pleaded with the leadership for a chance in many elections but everything went in vain.

Rosamma Chacko, who was a prominent leader in the Congress, hailed from Kottayam district. She was very much involved in the politics from her student days and she became the Member of the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee Executive at the age of 29 in 1956 and later served as the Vice President of the KPCC from 1960 to 1963 under C.K Govindan Nair's presidentship. Unlike today, KPCC had only one Vice President those days and that was considered as a powerful position in the party. Despite being in the top jobs in the party in the early time of her political career, a leader of such heavy weight, had to wait till 1987 to get a seat to contest to the Kerala Assembly. She contested from Idukki and won against Cyriac Perumana with a margin of 9801 votes. In the 1991 elections, she was shifted from Idukki to Chalakkudy, a place which was completely unknown to her. In spite of being shifted to the new place she again won with a margin of 5740 votes against George Painadath of the LDF. In 1996, she was once again shifted to another constituency, Manalur. She was a strange figure in Manalur too when compared with the opponent. She made miracle in Manalur by winning with a small margin though, which surprised her opponents in the party and in the opposite front. Towards the end of her third term in the assembly she requested A.K Antony, the then Opposition Leader, that they need not consider her for the next election since she was shifted to three different

constituencies continuously despite her victories and welfare work undertaken by her in those constituencies. (Rosamma Chacko, Interview, Decemeber 16, 2017) Rosamma Chacko's case was another trend that the male dominated party leadership followed with many women leaders. In a similar way, earlier O.T Saradakrishnan who was an M.L.A from Kozhikode-I in the first two assemblies was shifted to Beypore , a relatively stronghold of the Communist party in the 1965 elections and she lost the elections as expected. She was shifted to yet another Communist stronghold, Alathur where she lost again and she gradually disappeared from the political picture. Deavki Krishnan was fielded twice in the assembly elections but both the constituencies were strongholds of the Communist party, i.e. Cherthala and Mararikkulam.

Congress did not even have a single woman candidate in the assembly elections of 1970, 1977 and 1982 where as the CPI (M) at least had a woman candidate in each election except in 1967. Other smaller parties in the State rarely had women as their candidates. Congress has given opportunity only for two women to become ministers in its electoral history in Kerala; they are M.T. Padma (1991-1996) and P.K. Jayalakshmi (2011-2016). M.T. Padma became minister due to the support of K.Karunakaran who was her political mentor whereas in Jayalakhmi's case it was done out of pressure from the national leadership of the party as she was the lone woman MLA of the party and the UDF put together. The party had five women legislators in the assembly in 2001, yet no one was made a minister.

In the Congress, the trend was to field the women mostly in unwinnable constituencies. If they won, the leadership made sure that most of them would be shifted to another constituency in the next election. Where as in Communist Party of India (Marxist), women were given more opportunities when compared to Congress, but history shows that the women in the Communist Party were not considered for the top jobs despite of having seniority and prominence in the party.

The CPI (M) in Kerala contested the assembly elections in 1987 with the slogan “*keram thingum kerala naattil KR Gowri bharicheedum* (The land of coconut trees will be ruled by KR Gowri)”. K.R Gowri Amma, a prominent woman leader of the CPI (M) and a member of the assembly since 1957, was the forefront runner for the post of C.M in the elections. But when the Left Front won the elections, the party backstabbed Gowri Amma and made E.K Nayanar, the CM of the state. Later in 1994 K.R Gowri Amma was expelled from the party on the ground of anti-party activities. Her expulsion from the party was actually a coup by her opponents in the party. K. R. Gowri Amma is the longest serving woman MLA in the Kerala Assembly and she was minister in almost all the Left led governments till 1991. In the same manner Susheela Goplan , a senior leader and the wife of A.K Goplan was the Opposition Leader in the Lok Sabha, lost the opportunity to become the Chief Minister of the State by the male dominated state leadership of the CPI (M) in 1996. The factional politics in the party did not her to rise to the top job; instead it was again given to E.K Nayanar. Susheela was made the Industries minister of the State. However, the CPI (M) has given more opportunities to women to become ministers than Congress. K.R Gouri Amma, Susheela Goplan, P.K. Sreemathy, K.K. Shylaja and J. Mercykutty Amma are the women who became minsters in the Left led governments and among them K.R. Gouri Amma served as minster in several cabinets.

Congress gave chance to a woman leader to contest to the Lok Sabha for the first time from Kollam which was a traditional Left seat. In all Lok Sabha elections, starting from 1951 to 2014, the seats allotted to women were all Left strongholds except Mukundapuram which was a traditional Congress seat from where Savithri Lekshmanan got elected twice adding the record of being the only Congress woman who became Lok Sabha MP. In the 2009 general elections Kasaragod Lok Sabha Constituency which had been represented by the CPI (M) for decades, was given to Shanimol Usman, the then State President of Mahila Congress. However she refused to contest from this unwinnable constituency. The number of women who had gone to the Lok Sabha on CPI (M) ticket is relatively high when compared to the Congress. Susheela Gopalan was fielded by the party five times and three times she won the elections. Apart from Susheela Gopalan, A. K Premjam, P. Sathidevi, C.S. Sujatha and P.K. Sreemathi are the women leaders of CPI (M) who got elected to the Lok Sabha. Bhargavi Thankappan is the only woman got elected to Lok Sabha on CPI ticket. In total, eight women could go to Lok Sabha from all the parties in Kerala which included Annie Masacarene who was an independent member.

The number of women from all the parties who were elected to the state assembly since 1957 is just forty three which included a few widows who were fielded just after their husbands died to make use of the pity wave. The number of seats allotted by all the political parties to women would always be very less which include unwinnable constituencies. Factionalism in the parties, caste-community equations and presence of more men in the party etc play crucial roles in distribution of tickets in the elections in all the parties and also in the formation of cabinets after the elections. (Oommen Chandy, Interview, December 26, 2017)

#### **Bill of Reservation for women**

Ignorance towards women is not only the case with Kerala alone; every other State in the country shares the same problem. Kerala's case is just a mirror against the larger issue in the country. The primary resolution for this inequality is the passage of the women's reservation bill. Nafeesath Beevi's opinion about the male domination and patriarchy in the political parties have been proved several times in the parliament whenever there was an attempt to table the women reservation bill. It was introduced in the Parliament for the first time by Deve Gowda government in 1996. Snagging the bill papers and physical attack became a familiar scene in the parliament whenever the bill was introduced in the House. The UPA-I &II made their attempts to table the bill in Rajya Sabah. The situation in Rajya Sabha reached at an all time low, when the members who were opposing the bill tried to attack Dr. Hamid Ansari , Vice President and Chairman of the House. They interrupted the tabling of the bill in the particular session. The political parties which are strongly opposing the bills are Samajwady Party, Rashrtiya Janata Dal and Janata Dal (United). OBCs and Muslims are the major vote banks of these parties. The legislators of these parties ran into the well on all occasions of tabling the bill. During A.B Vajpayee's time, one member even went to the Speaker and snatched the bill and tore it into bits.

In 2008, HR Bharadwaj , the then Union Minister of Law had to change his seat to the middle row of the treasury bench in order to present the bill without trouble. He was also flanked by two women ministers. One member from Samajwadi Party tried to

snag the bill from Bharadwaj but he was pushed away by another woman Union minister Renuka Choudhary. However the bill was passed in Rajya Sabha in spite of ruckus in the House on 9<sup>th</sup> March, 2010. Attitude of the male members of different parties towards the bill was evident in the dramas took place in the parliament from time to time. All these 21 years, these parties have fought the bill tooth and nail. But now Janata Dal (U) has changed their stance on the bill. A country that boasts about being the largest democracy of the world has witnessed cheap political dramas in the parliament whenever there was introduction of women's reservation bill. The patriarchal minded legislators always refused to show deference to the attempts of bringing about revolutionary changes in the democracy of this country. It will be a permanent law only when the Lok Sabha and half of India's state legislatures pass the bill and signed by the President of India. Does that mean more dramas waiting in the Lok Sabha and the state legislatures?

Former Janata Dal (U) leader, Sharad Yadav once made a controversial remark during a discussion on women's reservation in the parliament in 1997. He said "Do you think these women with short hair can speak for women, for our women ..." (Kumar, Korff and Sudhir, 2018, p.8). There is something serious to think about this although he made the statement to oppose the bill. Those women who have reached the upper layer of politics have always been from the elite backgrounds and with good education. It is extremely hard to find woman leaders from rural background in the Indian politics. The proposed women reservation bill must be able to bring about the rise of rural women, regardless of their educational qualifications, into the national and state politics. The opponents of the bill want a quota within the quota i.e. provisions for the reservation for the backward class women within the bill which will make the bill more convoluted. It is true that it will be meaningless if it would only give opportunities for the elite women. In this regard the political parties that support women's reservation bill, must take Sharad Yadav's criticism seriously and ensure women's participation from all walks of life. Unless and until the major political parties give tickets to women in large number, irrespective of their social background, before the enforcement of the law, the chaos will continue to exist in the Indian political scenario. The grand old party in India, which had a woman as its longest serving president, must take the lead in this process.

### **Conclusion**

The lesser number of women in the parliament and the state legislatures largely affect the policies that are made by the law makers. Women will get the benefits of the policies made by the legislature only when there is a large representation of women present in the law making body. A report published by the Rajyasabha in 2008 also supports this fact. The report states that the men cannot represent the interest of women. Only women can represent the diversity of women. Time has proved that the aspiration of the women in India cannot be achieved as they fondly imagine.

All the political parties must reach to a consensus by which they should take the lead in getting 33% reservation for women. The problem cannot possibly be resolved unless the current government, which has a majority of its own, takes a step forward to pass it in the Lok Sabha. If we look at the political history of India from 1996 to

2014, we can see that all the governments at the center were run by coalitions and each government had its own limitations in overcoming the obstacles before the bill. Although the current government has a coalition set up, the ruling party alone has the majority to pass the bill in the lower house. The parties that are fighting the bill tooth and nail need to shun the attitude of '*males are born to dominate*' and give women an opportunity to excel in politics too. That is the only penance the male dominated leaderships of all the parties can do to the women for the injustice they have been facing from the time of Independence. The demand for reservation is more relevant in the present time when women have proved their eminence in all spheres of the society. Hansa Mehta once made a remark in the Constituent Assembly of India while speaking on the 'Social, Economic and Political Justice for Women in India'. It goes like this, "*It is true that a few women in the past and even today enjoy high status and have received the highest honour that any man can receive, like our friend, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu. But these women are few and far between. One swallow does not make a summer. These women do not give us a real picture of the position of Indian women in this country.*" (Selected Speeches, 2012, p.67). This statement sums up the argument for women's reservation and it explains the need of the hour.

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