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Women a Formidable Force in Elections

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A Review:

The overall subordination of women in our society has contributed to their vulnerability in all the fields be it politics, employment etc. India is ranked 108th out of 149 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index (released by the World Economic Forum in 2020). Females along with SC, ST and OBC workers emerge as the most vulnerable group within our casteist and patriarchal system that lacks structural reforms. According to an International Labour Organization (ILO) report based on NSSO data, there exists enormous disparities between male and female workers in terms of pay and working conditions. As per Thampi and Anand (2019), India's educated, youth and women, especially lower-caste women, are bearing the burden of India's rising unemployment. Unemployment is deeply gendered: We see that graduate women faced an unemployment rate of 30.6% as opposed to 9.9% among graduate men, and women with a postgraduate degree or higher faced an unemployment rate of 23.8% compared to 8.4% among men in the same educational category. It is well-known that India's female labour force participation is low and declining. Since gender does play a role in reducing a women's opportunity in a job market, it becomes even more imperative to allow reservation of seats for women, be it employment or in politics.

As far as political participation is concerned, Bhavnani (2009) states that "women's reservation leads to increase in political participation of women in successive elections." Bhavnani argues that the reserved seats increase the chance of a woman winning office by approximately five times, even after the seat becomes unreserved. Reservations allow women initial entry into politics hence

making it easier for them to secure party tickets and win office after reservations lapse. It not only ensures a women's capacity to lead from the front but also becomes known to others and makes way for them in future. Reservation in politics definitely helps to enhance the probability of opportunities coming a women's way.

Reservations have ensured that women play an active role in politics and they have also proved beyond doubt that they are a force to reckon with as far as their voting rights are concerned.

A look at the sops being doled out to win women voters in the 5 poll-bound states, shows our political parties' new found love for women. This is however, not without a reason. For once, Bihar has to be given its due, as it has definitely been a torchbearer in this regard. Afterall, Nitish Kumar has proved it successfully and beyond doubt that loyal and unflinching support of women voters do play crucial role in polls and that they are the real king makers. Symbiotic relationship between women voters and Nitish ensured continuous electoral victory for him. The fact that women voters have outnumbered men in a number of states, including all poll bound states of Goa, Manipur, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, make female voters the game-changers and hence the fight amongst political parties to outdo one another in wooing female voters.

The experience in Bihar has proved that women-centric schemes and programmes are quite instrumental in creating a solid support base of women voters, which has ensured successive election victories for JDU in the state. In Bihar's Assembly election of 2005, the female voter turnout was 42.51 % and was less than the male voter turnout. From 2010 to 2015, women voter turnout shot up from 54.4 % to reach a record 60.4%. Female voters surpassed men for the third assembly election in a row with women at 59.7% in 2020 elections. Nitish's timely intervention to uplift and empower the 4.9 million women, forming almost half of the state's population, ensured back-to-back electoral victory for him. With a proven track record, it is only wise that different political parties take a cue from Nitish -led Bihar if they are serious about success in polls.

The list of promises that political parties have already made, would definitely give Nitish a 'been there done that' feel because be it reservation for women in government jobs or financial support for education and marriage, Nitish seems to have seen it all. Bihar which had a long history of women being subjugated and discriminated against due to feudal, caste and patriarchal oppression, saw them emerging as a formidable force. The State did grab eyeballs when Nitish launched unique and well-thought about schemes for women

empowerment. The first of its kind in the country was Mukhyamantri Cycle Yojana which was hailed as a revolutionary step in effectively raising the enrollment rate of girls in schools. To fight against child marriage, Bihar government rolled out Mukhya Mantri Kanya Utthan Yojana, with monetary incentive for girls, right from the time of their birth till completion of graduation when they would receive 25,000 rupees. Special monthly allowances are also given to acid attack victims and widows.

Bihar became the first state in the country to implement 50 % reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, Urban Local Bodies and primary teacher's posts. The move was applauded for bringing in a 'silent revolution' in Bihar's politics. Another historic attempt to court women constituency was the 35% reservation for women in all government jobs including the police force. Women now make up 25% of the state's police force-the highest in the country and more than double the national average (10.3%). To ensure their participation in field postings, 35% of posts from SHO to the SDM level is reserved for women. Girls also get 35% reservation in medical and engineering admissions. Nitish government to fulfil his poll promise to women, banned liquor in Bihar in 2016, despite suffering huge revenue losses. All these measures have not only made Bihar's progress an inclusive and sustainable one but have guaranteed a long tenure for the JD(U) government.

With the aim of following the winning streak of Nitish-led government in Bihar, all the political parties, be it BJP or Congress, are going all out to win over women voters in UP, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Goa and Manipur.

In Punjab, Congress state chief Navjot Singh Sidhu has taken the lead in making barrage of promises starting with Rs 2,000 monthly allowance for women homemakers, surpassing Aam Aadmi Party's promise of 1000 rupees. While speaking at a rally in Barnala, he also promised free cooking gas cylinders, two-wheelers to college going girls and monetary incentive to girls including Rs 20,000 on passing class 12. Setting up of women commando battalion, free transfer of properties in the name of women and interest free loans to run home-based businesses are some of the lucrative incentives to win over women voters in Punjab. According to Sidhu, it was to recognise the hard work of women that they wanted to do so much for them. But, the number of women candidates they have fielded in the state defy his emotions. While having a vote share of 50%, only 10 percent have been given tickets to contest election in the state. However, in Uttar Pradesh, the Congress is experimenting and taking the lead by announcing 40 % reservation of seats for women. According to the Election Commission office, enrolment of women in large numbers during the revision of

electoral rolls has led to an improvement in the gender ratio by 11 points from 857 against 1000 male voters on November 1, 2021, to 868 by Dec, 5. Women have clearly outnumbered men in registering themselves in the electoral rolls, emerging as potential power brokers. For obvious reasons, **Akhilesh Yadav of Samajwadi Party cannot be left far behind in wooing the female voters. The party's 'Samajwadi Vachan Patra' promises** 33 per cent reservation for women of all communities in government jobs including police force. The BJP too in its manifesto 'Lok Kalyan Sankalp Patra' has announced a number of allurements for women, including free commute for women passengers above 60 in public transport. They have also promised a whopping ₹1000 crore to be used for 'Mission Pink Toilet, along with CCTV cameras, Pink Police booths and doubling of women members in UPPSC.

Similar is the case in Manipur where Congress, aiming at returning to power has promised one-third reservation for women in all government jobs. It is noteworthy that here too women outnumber men by over 64,000.

In Goa too women voters outnumber men. No wonder, the TMC in Goa has promised apart from a direct cash transfer of Rs 5,000 per month to woman of every household, a 33 percent reservation in all jobs and 50 percent reservation in local bodies. Two fast-track courts to address crime against women and children and an SOS Suraksha mobile app for women's safety too find a place in their manifesto. Further, while Kejriwal has promised doubling the remuneration provided to women in Goa, Priyanka Gandhi has promised 30% of the new government jobs to be reserved for females.

Increasing vote share along with increasing interest in politics, have thus, made women a force to reckon with in politics. And, having proven themselves as loyal support base for the party in Bihar, women have reached a point where they can command more respect and demand more sops from the political parties.

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