

Sex exploitation and political feminism in India

Richa Thapliyal¹, Sanghapal Uttam Mhaske²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Graphic Era Deemed to be University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Arts Graphic Era Hill University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India

ABSTRACT

Women political leaders are few and far between especially in the context of developing countries like India and the policies veering around sex exploitation are yet to be brought to the fore for ensuring that women empowerment and freedom is realized. In this context, the present study seeks to provide a background of sex exploitation in terms of leadership in politics and the framing of public policies is also meager. The study invoked documentary analysis and perspectives were sought from experts in the domain using a semi-structured interview protocol. Analysis from the perspectives received showed that women leadership needs to be promoted at the higher echelons of political hierarchy and efforts need to be made for furthering public policies veering around sex exploitation so that the same may be eradicated from the country. The study is original in the sense that to the best of authors' knowledge, this is the first study wherein the need for promoting women leadership and furthering public policies regarding effacing of sex exploitation to make Indian women free and safe.

Keywords: India, Feminism, Political leadership, Women, Sex exploitation

INTRODUCTION

In the context of feminism, it has been observed that writings are more focused on the understanding of the challenges and pitfalls associated with being a woman. Likewise, in the context of politics, especially in the Indian context-a developing country's domain- it needs to be pointed out that Indian women representation in politics is topsy-turvy. Besides the fact that Indian women in politics are not provided with the required opportunities to express themselves in the political sphere, the voices of the women who are suppressed in their families and work are equally exploited in their homes and this causes an imbalanced scale as far as the notion of equality in society is concerned. Women are exploited in their homes and in work places and this holds true for the hoi polloi as well as the elite-inclusive of the politicians. The present study seeks to present views and counterviews on the status and conditions of women in the political sphere with special reference to India.

Background

Feminism implies the role and expressions associated with women (Sinha, 2000). As such, women have been identified as the weaker sex and their conditions have been represented as being weak-kneed and humble as compared to the men. Ever since the writings on feminism emerged until the neo-feminism cultures, it has been pointed out that women have always been a suppressed lot and their conditions need to be improved by taking suitable measures at the political as also the socio-economic spheres. Traditionally conceived as the child-bearers and bereft of the economic independence, women are unable to express their pain and tribulations before the society and this leads to a precarious situation because women are unable to express their woes which makes them emaciated and even impacts their mental and physical health.

Women, in the pre-colonial feminist writings, were portrayed as the hallmarks of victimhood and they were never recognized for their worth despite undergoing several pains and trials in their lives (Gupta, 2016). Such pains were symbolic of the hard work that they had to perform in their daily lives as also the tests of hardship evinced during their growing and development stages in the family. Usually decried as the unwanted child in the family, the girl child was never treated at par with the male counterparts. During puberty, the female child was further subjected to untold miseries and subjection by the heads of the household as also by the brothers. Thus, the females were relegated to the dark corners of their houses and they were not allowed to move out and live their lives the way their male counterparts could. Thus, the females of the times were trained to be meek and subjugated to lower standards and they were always asked to work in the kitchens or maintain the house. Women were trained in household work and chores and thus, they were not able to grow healthily. Later, when they would grow up, they were married off early and had to bear the brunt of motherhood at early ages. Child-bearing had become an important part of a girl's life and so was the performance of household chores. Attending to their family was the sine qua non of any girl's functionality. Women did not have any political rights and in the days of city polis, there were no chances where the women could find their representation in the political spheres. Women did not have any opportunities of being the political leaders and given the leadership of males in the political circles, women were not allowed and banned from political life. Even apart from being debarred from political life in the capacity of political leaders, women were also lagging behind in terms of their civic participation. For instance, women were not allowed to vote and this led to their being subsumed to a lower level of social stratification as compared the males (Mullally, 2004). Women were not allowed to vote for their preferred leaders. Women were not allowed to step outside their homes, anyway, without the escort of their male counterparts. Even in the Swiss cantons where the direct democracy was practiced, women were debarred from political participation in terms of voting and deliberating on political decisions impinging upon the makeup of the policies relevant for the society. Thus, public policies were designed bereft of their participation in the political sphere in terms of public policy-making. Despite the fact that policy-making involves the ones made for the society which had impact on and included women in toto, women were not involved in the public policy-making process.

The colonial writings in feminism are noteworthy for the fact that women were kept as slaves in the colonies and other administrative divisions where the occupied territories. Given the kind of enslavement of women by the colonial powers, it was more of a problem when it came to the dimension of women's condition (Niranjana, 2007). Colonial times witnessed innumerable wars and they resulted in the abject conditions of women especially at the hands of the foreigners. Colonies were weak in themselves and there was no chance wherein the women could participate in the policy-making or assume political leadership in any way. Furthermore, it goes without saying that women were not allowed to vote at all in these times when the colonies were formed and there were no opportunities for the women for making decisions regarding the public policy-making.

In the post-colonial times, writings on feminism grew pace with the emphasis upon freedom and emancipation. There was a call for women's rights and duties. Charters were drafted for the women emancipation and the opportunities to be given to the women to realize their womanhood and the advantages to be accrued therefrom. Women were participants in the social, economic and political spheres more than ever before. There was a call for equality of freedom of opportunity of women at par with the men and the same gets reflected in the Constitutions of the world-case in point being that of the Indian, French or the American Constitutional provisions. Post-colonial writings in feminism also underlined the fact that women need to assume top leadership roles and that any forms of exploitation needs to come to an end (Menon, 2016). Women were assured equality of opportunity across a myriad set of spheres and they had the opportunity of participating in the deliberations involving public policies. Women, of course, had the opportunity of voting for their preferred leaders and thus this led to strengthening of the argument that women are free and liberated in all senses.

Research context

The present study seeks to underline the fact that sex exploitation among the women in the society with reference to India has been on the rise and there are no amicable public policies to tackle this menace till date. Second, the study seeks to underline that political leaders-especially women-find themselves in a precarious position when it comes to bringing up policies regarding the public policies regarding the women empowerment in India despite several decades of independence. Indian women politicians are outnumbered by the male counterparts in the legislatures in the central, regional and local levels and thus, their voices remain unheard. The study is based on the narratives shared by 11 experts who are leading academicians in the field of political science and sociology. The study is based on the documentary analysis and narratives from the experts regarding the sex exploitation in Indian context and how the women political leaders are finding it difficult to appraise the actual environmental context and come up with an amicable solution for raising the voices of the suppressed women of India.

Narratives from the experts

Semi-structured interviews were used as the appropriate modus operandi to approach the 11 experts hailing from academics specializing in political science and sociology. Specifically, the experts were approached after following a specific interview protocol and they were requested to participate in the study with due consideration of the research questions and objectives as also the time frame relevant for the study. Experts were contacted in-person and in line with their convenience,

interviews were conducted with the experts.

The first question pertained to the nature and scale of sex exploitation in India and the reasons as to why public policies were lagging behind in the country. One of the experts suggested that it is owing to the continuance of the colonial mindset that Indian political system has not witnessed any change and that there is a need for understanding the reasons as to why sex exploitation exists across the board and what is the nature and scope of sex exploitation in the country. It was surmised that enough research has not been undertaken regarding the sex exploitation in terms of female infanticide, dowry deaths, rape, murders, beatings, etc. Even the women in the domestic households are facing innumerable difficulties in terms of their being suppressed very much like the working women or the school and college going girls. “Why is the police and administration silent over these cases of torture and disgust for the women?”- expressed one of the experts. The experts rationalized that there is a need for the women causes to be brought to the forefront so that women are able to appreciate their expression of freedom across all spheres that were hitherto reserved for the males.

The second question that was posed to the experts related to the political leadership roles and it was maintained that women do not have the requisite skills to express themselves freely in the political circles and it was often observed that women leaders have been suppressed all the times. Even in the legislatures, women leaders are outnumbered by men and they are not able to bring forth the women centric issues like sex exploitation in the nature of marital discord, for instance. There were differences in the religious traditions observed by the countrymen and this led to the acuteness of divergent opinions. Experts also averred that women leaders were not able to cast their votes in the case of tie and even if they did, their political parties or husbands would rule the roost. Women political leaders found themselves in a pitiable situation given that women leaders were not able to appreciate the manner in which they could asset themselves in the public sphere.

Thirdly, in response to the question that why sex ratio was topsy-turvy in India and the civic participation of women lagged behind in comparison with that of men, it was observed by the experts that women were shy of stepping outside their homes, for one. Second, women were discouraged by their family heads or immediate family members as far as voting were concerned. Women voters are busy in performing their daily household chores and this leads to their being occupied the whole day leaving aside the opportunity of being a part of civic duties-voting, for instance. One of the experts opined: “There is a need for a refurbishment in the mindset and outlook of Indian males when it comes to women participation in civic life, especially voting... Men need to be conditioned that women do have an important say in the making of the political landscape and therefore, women participation is mandatory.” Sex exploitation policies may be made only with due concurrence and participation of women and this requires the participation of women in the deliberative bodies and organizations.

Finally, the question posed to the experts related to the manner in which political leadership may be strengthened in India in the digital age. Given the challenges of the Digital Economy and the progression of the country from Society 5.0 to Society 6.0 and Industry 4.0 to Industry 5.0, it is important that the worth of women be taken into consideration at least in the present. Much water has flown under the bridge since the independence of the country and it is time when it was realized

that women participation in higher echelons of political circles be increased either through quota management (i.e. allocating a certain percentage of seats for women in the legislatures) or giving a higher value to the vote of women (i.e. increasing the worth of one vote exercised by the women candidates in the legislatures as also in civic life). Efforts need to be made for furthering the educational capacities and capabilities of women and public policies need to be drafted such that women are able to realize their worth in a much befitting manner.

Conclusion

Based on the literature review and views of the experts, it may be deduced that women leadership in the political circles needs to be bolstered in the coming times, especially from the perspective of a developing country like India. It is important that public policies be made for ameliorating the conditions of women and ills of sex exploitation need to be tackled in an appropriate manner. In line with the opinions of the experts, two main conclusions follow. First, women participation in the political circles may be furthered and strengthened if the requisite edifice is strengthened. Second, women participation in political circles may be bolstered only with the change in the attitudinal mindset and behavior of the men. The study shows that sex exploitation has been a menace for long and this needs to be checked before its too late. Indian women need to assert themselves in political domain and this requires that the males should be a party to realize this vision. Given that India is moving towards digital economy, the need to empower women becomes all the more important in view of the myriad set of challenges in the changed scenario. Finally, it needs to be appreciated that feminist research on the assumption of leadership roles pertaining to women and the manner in which sex exploitation policies are being framed and, better still, need to be drafted in future, also need to be appreciated. This implies that further research is warranted in terms of the Indian women political leaders and opinions may be solicited from them regarding their challenges in the politics. The study was limited in terms of the scope and spatial and temporal context, and, further studies may be conducted to appreciate the comparison between the emergence and growth of women leadership in the developed and developing countries and lessons to be drawn from the former.

References

1. Gupta, H. (2016). Taking action: The desiring subjects of neoliberal feminism in India. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 17(1), Article 11.
2. Menon, N. (2016). Is feminism about 'women'? A critical view on intersectionality from India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50(17), 37-44.
3. Mullally, S. (2004). Feminism and multicultural dilemmas in India: Revisiting the Shah Bano case. *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 24(4), 671-692.
4. Niranjana, T. (2007). Feminism and cultural studies in Asia. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 9(2), 209-218.
5. Sinha, M. (2000). Refashioning mother India: Feminism and nationalism in late-colonial India. *Feminist Studies*, 26(3), 623-644.