

Women in the Politics of Himachal Pradesh : An Analysis

Bhawana Jharta*

INTRODUCTION:

India, the largest democracy of the world and an emerging power of the 21st century is going to complete its 64 years of independence but the ideals of democracy especially for the women are yet far from being realized. Women in our country are still struggling hard for equal participation in every sphere including the politics. India got its first woman Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi about four decades back in 1966 and its first President, Pratibha Devi Singh Patil in 2007. In this respect, we are atleast ahead of America, where till date, there has been no woman President or Prime Minister in its long history of political democracy. In India, many women have held berths in the Union Council of Ministers and also held important positions of Governors and Chief Ministers in the States. The notable women Chief Ministers who have led their governments successfully include Sucheta Kriplani and Mayavati (UP), Nandini Satyapathi (Orissa), Sashikala Kakodhar (Goa), Saida Anvara Thaimur (Assam), Janki Ram Chandran and J. Jayalalitha (Tamilnadu), Rajinder Kaur Bhattal (Punjab), Rabri Devi (Bihar), Sushma Swaraj and Sheila Dikshit (Delhi), Uma Bharti (Madhya Pradesh), Vasundhra Raje Schindhia (Rajasthan) and Mamta Banerjee (West Bengal). The women Governors include Sarojini Naidu (UP), Padmja Naidu (West Bengal), Vijay Laxmi Pandit (Maharashtra), Sharadha Mukerjee and Kumud Ben Joshi (Andhra Pradesh), Jyoti Vanketchaylam and Ram Dulari Sinha (Kerla), Sarla Grewal (Madhya Pradesh), Chandrawati, Rajendra Kumari Vajpei and Rajni Rai (Pondichery), Sheila Kaul, B.S. Rama Devi, Prabha Rao and Urmila Singh (Himachal Pradesh), Justice M. Fatima Bibi (Tamil Nadu) and Pratibha Patil (Rajasthan).¹ Not only this, the leadership of some of the national and state political parties like the Congress, Bahujan Samajwadi Party, AIADMK and Trinamul Congress is in the hands of women like Sonia Gandhi, Mayavati, Jaya Lalitha and Mamta Banerjee respectively.

The above scenario clearly shows that our society has never been hesitant to accept women leaders and politicians as the centre of power. But, this is not the tale of the Common Indian women. In fact, the last about six decades have been a story of missed opportunities for women in political arena. Although, the

Constitution of India has guaranteed equal opportunities and rights to women at par with men, yet political power is still a male monopoly and a distant dream for common Indian women. The active participation of women in governance processes has remained restricted to a smaller number of elite women and not to the common Indian womenfolk. Women are hardly making a progress into politics and their participation in politics at the state and national levels has been appallingly low.

If we look at the representation of women in Parliament, we find that the 15th Lok Sabha has only 59 women members which is mere 10.86 percent of the total strength of 543. The number of women MPs elected to the 15th Lok Sabha is the highest since independence. This figure shames the largest democracy of the world despite the fact that women constitute nearly half of the citizenry and voting strength. It has taken more than five decades for the percentage of women members in the House to move-up partially from a mere 4.9 percent in the first Lok Sabha in 1952 to 10.86 percent in 15th Lok Sabha in 2009, a figure that is far below than the average of around 15 percent in the countries which have elected legislatures.² As per the latest survey of Indian Institute of Public Opinion, the countries like Sweden (40.4%), Norway (39.4 percent), Finland (33.5 percent), Denmark (33.0 percent), Holland (31.3 percent), New Zealand (26.2 percent), Germany (26.2 percent), Spain (24.6 percent), China (21.0 percent), Switzerland (21.0 percent), Canada (18.0 percent), Australia (15.5 percent), Mexico (14.2 percent), USA (11.7 percent), Russia (10.2 percent), Britain (9.5 percent), Bangladesh (9.1 percent), etc. have better representation of women in their legislatures than India.

Similarly, the representation of women in the decision-making positions has been significantly quite low in India. Since the first Lok Sabha (1952), a very few women have reached the highest level of authority. Till date, there have been only one woman Prime Minister, 10 women cabinet ministers, 56 Ministers of State and 22 Deputy Ministers. Further, women are generally given 'soft' portfolios like health, welfare, culture, education, women and child development, etc. and are excluded from the key ministries like Commerce, Defence, Home, Finance, Foreign Affairs, Railways, etc.³

Like the national picture in India, Himachal Pradesh is also not an exception to this sorrow state of affairs of women's participation in politics and their representation in decision making bodies. Himachal Pradesh came into being as a centrally administered territory on April 15, 1948 after the integration of 30 erstwhile princely hill states. It became a full-fledged 18th State of the Indian Union on January 25, 1971. As per 2001 census, the total geographical area of Himachal Pradesh is 55,673 Sq.kms. having a population of 60.78 lakh persons. For the administrative purposes, presently the State has been divided into 3 administrative divisions, 12 districts, 75 developmental blocks, 75 tehsils and 34 Sub-tehsils, 52 Sub-divisions, 3243 Panchayats, 75 Panchayat Samitis, 12 Zila Parishads, 49 Urban local bodies including one Municipal Corporation, 20 Municipal Committees and 28 Nagar Panchayats.⁴ In Himachal Pradesh, there is

a unicameral legislature consisting of 68 members. Out of the total sixty-eight legislative assembly constituencies, sixteen are reserved for scheduled castes and three for the scheduled tribes. The state has four seats including one reserved for scheduled castes in the Lok Sabha and three seats in the Rajya Sabha.

During the last about 63 years of its formation, this hill state has crossed many milestones. The actual momentum of growth and development mainly picked up only after the State attained statehood in 1971. The metamorphosis of Himachal Pradesh from a backward hill state to one of the most developed states in the country has been truly remarkable. As per India Today Report 'State of the States', Himachal Pradesh is ranked best in investment, primary education and health. Himachal is the first State to achieve universalization of primary education and 100 percent literacy-faster than Kerala.⁵

There is a significant participation of women in various fields like education, occupation, employment, etc. in the past few decades in the State. Women have been holding important positions in various capacities in the State like Governor, Ministers, members of Parliament, Chief Justice, State Election Commissioner, Chief Secretary, Additional Chief Secretary, Principal Secretary, Divisional Commissioner, Secretary, Additional Secretary, Chief Accountant General, Superintendent of Police (Crime), Director of Health, Director of Education, etc. Besides this, women have been holding important positions in various other departments of the government in the State. But they are still marginal in politics. Women are not getting adequate representation in the Parliament, State Legislature and other decision-making bodies. A strong women's political activism is still not visible on the part of the Himachali women. Like India, gender bias has always been there in the politics of the State. The politics is dominated by men and they want to retain their monopoly on it.

WOMEN IN THE POLITICS OF HIMACHAL PRADESH:

In the present paper, an attempt has been made to analyse the nature and extent of women's participation in politics in the State of Himachal Pradesh and to know the main factors which are responsible for relegating them to the secondary position in politics. Further, some measures have also been suggested to bring women to the centre-stage of the politics of the hill state. For the present study, the secondary data have been employed. The data have been collected from the office records of Himachal Pradesh Vidhan Sabha, State Election Commission, State Election Department and Panchayati Raj Department. The books, Journals, Magazines, Newspapers, Gazeteers, H.P. Vidhan Sabha Who's Who, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha Who's Who, Census Reports, Statistical Outlines of Himachal Pradesh have also been consulted.

Although not much in numbers, yet Himachali women remained an integral part of the national freedom movement and various Praja Mandal Movements. Some prominent women activists who took active part in these movements were Durga Bai Arya and Mera Ben in Una, Lalita Kumari, popularly known as Rani Kheragarhi in Mandi; Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi in Shimla; Naura Richard wife of Phillip Richard; Sarla Sharma, Susheela and Ram Rakhi, a niece of Pahari Gandhi Baba Kanshi Ram in Kangra; Dev Vati in Theog (Shimla); Sunhari Devi, Sakno Devi and a Harijan Women Almo Devi in Sirmaur, etc.⁶ Thus, women remained on the fore-front of freedom movement in the State but their number was very small. It may be mentioned here that the women who took active part in these movements were either from royal families or were wives or daughters or relatives of some revolutionaries. However, the general women folk remained indifferent towards the freedom struggle in the Hill State of Himachal Pradesh.

After independence, Women's participation in politics has increased and improved in the State. But, the impact is more visible in voting than in other political activities. Elections to the State Legislative Assembly were first held in 1952 when Himachal Pradesh became a Part 'C' State of the Indian Union. After the dissolution of the Assembly on October 31, 1956, next elections for the Territorial Council which replaced the Assembly were held in 1957 and 1962. After the revival of the Assembly on July 1, 1963, elections have been held at regular intervals in 1967, 1972, 1977, 1982, 1985, 1990, 1993, 1998, 2003 and in 2007. Till today, 13 elections have been held in Himachal Pradesh.

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN VOTING:

The citizens of a democratic country have the right to participate in governing that country by means of voting. In a democracy, voting determines the sovereign will of the people. It is the "right to vote" by which the people vote a government in and out. Voting is the means for choosing leaders for determining who shall govern. Participation of voters at the time of election indicates their involvement in the political process. In a country like India, most of the citizens participate in governmental affairs only through voting. The voting is the most common mode of political participation among the women.⁸ The number of women voters has been almost equal to the men voters and sometimes even more in different elections to the H.P. State Legislative Assembly. Table 1 shows the participation of women in voting during the different Assembly elections in Himachal Pradesh.

Table 1

Participation of Women in voting in Different H.P. Legislative Assembly Elections (1972-2007)

Year	Voters (in lakhs)			Voting Percentage			Difference in Men and Women Voting Percentage
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	
1972	18.05	-	-	49.95	-	-	-
1977	19.97	10.27	9.70	58.57	62.16	54.76	- 7.40
1982*	22.12	11.02	11.10	71.06	73.29	68.85	- 4.44
1985*	23.52	11.73	11.84	70.36	71.91	68.83	- 3.08
1990	30.58	15.47	15.11	67.73	69.48	65.97	- 3.51
1993	32.67	16.43	16.24	71.72	72.21	71.21	- 1.00
1998**	36.28	18.27	18.01	71.23	70.24	72.23	+ 1.99
2003**	41.01	20.81	20.20	74.51	73.14	75.92	+ 2.78
2007**	46.04	23.36	22.68	71.61	69.67	74.55	+ 4.88

Note : Data before 1972 are not available. The voting percentage of men and women (2007) does not include postal votes as the sex-wise break-up of 21,483 postal votes polled is not available

* More women voters than men.

** More voting percentage of women than men.

Source: *Reports on General Elections to Himachal Pradesh State Legislative Assembly from 1972 to 2007*, Chief Electoral Officer and Financial Commissioner, Government of Himachal Pradesh, Shimla-9.

Table 1 brings out that there was not much difference in the number of men and women voters in different Assembly elections in the State. In 1982 and 1985, women voters were even more than men voters. The data in the table also show that voting percentage of women has increased in the past elections. In the last three Assembly elections of 1998, 2001 and 2007, the trend shows that women have exercised their franchise more than that of men. This indicates that due to the higher literacy among the women in the State (68.08 percent), they know very well the value of their votes. They are conscious about their voting right. The increase in voting percentage of women indicates that their interest in politics is increasing and this increasing participation of women in voting may be considered as a sign of strengthening of political democracy in the Hill State. The increase in the voting percentage of women in different elections may also be attributed to the fact that the women representatives in PRIs and Municipalities, and other women political activists are mobilizing the women voters to take more part in voting during the elections.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN THE STATE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY:

Although, women as voters are playing a very important and decisive role in the formation of governments in the State, yet their representation in the State Legislature, Parliament and decision-

making bodies has been very disappointing. Women's representation in the State Legislative Assembly Territorial Council remained appallingly low before 1972. Women who have been the members of the State Legislative Assembly, Territorial Council before 1972 are: Umavati, Satyavati Dang, Devindra Kumari, Subhadra Amin Chan and Sarla Sharma. Uma Vati was elected to Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly after the integration of Part 'C' State of Bilaspur with Himachal Pradesh in 1954. Satyavati Dang was nominated to the Territorial Council (1957-1962), Devindra Kumari was elected to the Territorial Council/Legislative Assembly (1962-67) and Subhadra Amin Chand remained a nominated member of Territorial Council/Legislative Assembly (1962-67). Sarla Sharma became member of Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly after the Re-organization of the State of Punjab in 1966. There was no woman member in the State Legislature from 1967 to 1971.⁹

Table 2
Representation of Women in H.P. Legislative Assembly (1972-2007)

Year	Total Seats	Total Contestants	Women Contestants (%age to the total contestants)	Seats Won by Women (%age to the Total Seats)	Party-Wise Distribution of Winning Women Contestants			
					INC	JP	BJP	JD
1972	68	-	5	5 (7.35)*	5	-	-	-
1977	68	330	9 (2.72)	1 (1.47)	-	1	-	-
1982	68	441	9 (2.04)	3 (4.41)	2	1	-	-
1985	68	294	8 (2.72)	3 (4.41)	3	-	-	-
1990	68	454	17 (3.74)	4 (5.88)	1	-	2	1
1993	68	416	16 (3.85)	4 (5.88)	4	-	-	-
1998	68	369	25 (6.78)	7 (10.29)	4	-	3	-
2003	68	408	31 (7.60)	4 (5.88)	4	-	-	-
2007	68	336	25 (7.44)	5 (7.35)	1	-	4	-

* One Woman member was elected in the bye-election.

Source: *Reports on General Elections to Himachal Pradesh State Legislative Assembly from 1972 to 2007*, Chief Electoral Officer and Financial Commissioner, Govt. of H.P., Shimla-9.

Table 2 shows that the representation of women in the State Legislative Assembly has been very small in comparison to men. Their number never exceeded 7 (10.29 percent) and that was in 1998. In 1972, soon after Himachal Pradesh attained Statehood, 5 (7.35 percent) women entered the Legislative Assembly. In 1977, there was only one woman representative in the State Assembly. After that, except in 1998 their representation in the State Legislative Assembly revolved around 3 (4.41 percent) to 5 (7.35 percent).

In 1972, four women namely Sarla Sharma, Chandresh Kumari, Lata Thakur and Padma contested the Assembly elections and interestingly, all the four women won the election. After the death of a Congress MLA, Lal Chand Stokes, his wife Vidya Stokes was elected to Vidhan Sabha in a bye-election in 1974. In 1977, nine women contested the election but only one woman (Shyama Sharma) got elected. There were

three women each in 1982 (Vidya Stokes, Chandresh Kumari and Shyama Sharma) and 1985 (Vidya Stokes, Viplov Thakur and Asha Kumari) who were elected to the Vidhan Sabha. In 1990 elections, four women (Shyama Sharma, Vidya Stokes, Leela Sharma and Sushma Sharma) were elected to the State Assembly whereas in the next elections of 1993, the number again was reduced to three (Viplov Thakur, Asha Kumari and Krishna Mohini). In a bye-election of 1994, one more woman (Anita Verma) was elected from Hamirpur Assembly constituency. Women's performance was the best ever in 1998 Assembly Elections, when in all seven women were elected, four on the Congress ticket (Vidya Stokes, Viplov Thakur, Asha Kumari and Krishna Mohini, and three on the BJP ticket (Urmil Thakur, Sarveen Chaudhary and Nirmla Devi) but one of the members, Krishna Mohini was unseated by the Supreme Court Judgement in 1999. In 2003 Assembly Elections, again four women of the Congress Party remained successful (Vidya Stokes, Asha Kumari, Anita Verma and Chandresh Kumari). In 2007, five women (Vidya Stokes of the Congress Party, and Sarveen Chaudhary, Urmil Thakur, Renu Chadha and Vinod Kumari Chandel of the BJP) were elected to the State Legislative Assembly.

The above statistics present a very disappointing picture of women's representation in the Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly. From 1972-2007, women have been elected on 36 seats and only 19 women have been elected against these 36 seats. Some women representatives have been elected more than once. Vidya Stokes has been elected for seven times; Asha Kumari for four; Viplov Thakur, Shyama Sharma and Chandresh Kuamri for three times each; Anita Verma, Krishna Mohini, Sarveen Chaudhary, Urmil Thakur have been elected for two times each whereas Nirmal Devi, Leela Sharma, Sarla Sharma, Sushma Sharma, Padma, Lata Thakur, Renu Chaddha and Vinod Kumari Chandel have been elected once.

One of the reasons for the low representation of women in the H.P. Legislative Assembly is that there has always been a very small number of women contestants. Table 2 shows that upto 1985, there has been only five to nine women constants. In 1990, there number increased to 17 (3.74 percent) which further got increased to 25 (6.78 percent) and 31 (7.60 percent) in 1998 and 2003 elections respectively. Again the number of women contestants decreased to 25 (7.44 percent) in 2007 Assembly elections despite the loud demands made by the Women's frontal organizations of the two main political parties of the State i.e. the BJP and the Congress for fielding women candidates at least on 33 percent of the total seats. It is rather a disappointing and discouraging number of women contestants in comparison to their voting strength. The political parties seem very reluctant to field women candidates and a very few women are put up by them as candidates in the elections. Though, some women contested elections as independent candidates but they never won any seat. Thus, contesting election still remains a male prerogative.

WOMEN IN THE STATE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS:

Like Legislative Assembly, women's representation in the Council of Ministers also remained very low in the State. There was no woman in the Council of Ministers from 1952 to 1971 and there has been a very few women ministers from 1972 to 2007. Sarla Sharma and Shyama Sharma remained Ministers of State in 1972 and 1977 respectively. Chandresh Kumari was made Deputy Minister in 1977 and Minister of State in 1984. In 1985, Vidya Stokes was appointed as first woman Speaker of the State and she also remained the Leader of Opposition from 1990 to 1992 and 2007 onwards. Leela Sharma was made Parliamentary Secretary in 1990. In 1995, after the expansion of Council of Minister, Asha Kumari and Viplov Thakur were inducted as Minister of State and Anita Verma was made Parliamentary Secretary. In 1998, two women, Urmil Thakur and Sarveen Chaudhary were made Parliamentary Secretaries. In 2003, in the Virbhadra Government, for the first time three women were appointed as Cabinet Ministers. They were Vidya Stokes, Asha Kumari and Chandresh Kumari. But, later on Asha Kumari had to resign due to a judicial case lying in the Hon'ble Court and Chandresh Kumari had to lose the ministry due to the downsizing of the Council of Ministers to 15 percent of the total number of members of the State Legislative Assembly according to the 91st Constitutional Amendment Act of 2003. In 2005, Anita Verma was made Parliamentary Secretary and was dropped after four months. In this way, the representation of women again got reduced to one in the eleven members Council of Ministers. In the present Dhumal Government, only one woman, Sarveen Chaudhary has been included in the Council of Ministers as a Cabinet Minister.¹⁰

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN THE PARLIAMENT:

Like State Legislative Assembly, women's representation in the Parliament also remained appallingly low from Himachal Pradesh. From 1952 till date, only three women were elected to the Lok Sabha from the State. In the first Lok Sabha General Elections of 1952, Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur was elected from Mandi-Mahashu Parliamentary constituency from the State on the Congress Party ticket. She was also included in the Central Council of Ministers as a Health Minister with a Cabinet rank. She is the only woman member of the Lok Sabha so far from the State who remained a minister in the centre. After that till 1980, five elections were held to Lok Sabha, but no woman could reach to the Lok Sabha from the State. Chandresh Kumari was elected from Kangra Parliamentary Constituency in 1984 and Pratibha Singh, wife of the then Chief Minister, Virbhadra Singh was elected to Lok Sabha from Mandi Parliamentary Constituency in 2004. All these three women elected to the Lok Sabha so far belonged to the Congress Party.¹¹

Women's representation in the Rajya Sabha from Himachal Pradesh is comparatively better than the Lok Sabha. Leela Devi Mahajan (1956-62) of Mandi was the first woman to represent the State in the Rajya

Sabha. After that, Satyawati Dang (1968-74), a prominent politician of the State; Mohinder Kaur (1964-67 and 1978-84); Usha Malhotra (1980-86); and Chandresh Kumari (1996-2002) remained members of the Rajya Sabha. Further, Viplov Thakur got an opportunity to become the member of the Rajya Sabha in 2006. Chandresh Kumari, is the only woman in Himachal Pradesh who has got an opportunity to be a member of both the houses of Parliament i.e. Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha as well as the State Legislative Assembly. She also remained a Cabinet and Deputy Minister in the State Cabinet. At the national level party politics, she also remained the President of All India Mahila Congress.¹²

WOMEN IN PRIs AND MUNICIPALITIES:

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1993) are a revolutionary landmark in the history of women's participation in politics in India. These amendment Acts have provided 33 percent reservation of seats for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Municipalities. This has laid down a strong foundation for women's participation in decision-making at the grass-roots level. These amendments have worked as a breakthrough towards ensuring equal access and more participation of women in the political power structure. The Panchayati Raj Institutions and Municipalities are playing a very significant role in the process of enhancing women's participation in public life at the local levels. In consonance of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, Himachal Pradesh Government has also passed its Panchayati Raj and Municipalities Acts in 1994 and first elections to the Panchayati Raj Institutions and Municipalities according to this new Act were held in December 1995. Till date, four general elections have been held to the PRIs and Urban Local bodies in the State in the years 1995, 2000, 2005 and 2010.

The latest amendment (2008) has provided 50 percent reservation of seats for women in PRIs and urban local bodies which is a historical step for the political empowerment of women in this hill state. In 2010, the elections to PRIs and urban local bodies were held as per the provisions laid down in the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Amendment Act, 2008 vide which 50 percent seats have been reserved for women in PRIs and urban local bodies. The experiment of 50 percent reservation of seats for women in PRIs and urban local bodies has been successful in the State. Before 1995, women's representation in PRIs and Municipalities was maximum upto two women in all the bodies. After 1995, it has increased to minimum 33 percent and now 50 percent since 2010 elections to the PRIs and urban local bodies. The representation of women in these institutions has shown an increasing trend. In the last four elections to the PRIs and urban local bodies, women have been elected even from the unreserved seats and their representation has been more than the fixed quota allotted to them.

In order to ensure equal participation and representation of women in PRIs and Municipalities, the government of Himachal Pradesh has taken an important step in this direction. The State Assembly has

passed unanimously the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Bill, 2008 on April 8, 2008, raising the reservation limit for women in PRIs from the existing 33 percent to 50 percent. It has also passed the Himachal Pradesh Municipal Corporation (Amendment) Bill, 2008, and Himachal Pradesh Municipal (Amendment) Bill, 2008 to provide 50 percent reservation for women in place of the existing 33 percent in Municipal Corporation, other municipalities and urban local bodies.¹³ These historic amendments have been brought about by the government so as to enhance participation of women in politics at the grass-roots level.

However, occupying formal positions of power is not enough. That does not make one necessarily powerful. The real test of power is one's ability to influence decision-making in a public action affecting the community. It has been observed that though the representation of women in PRIs and Municipalities has increased but the situation of reservation could not make much difference in leadership in these bodies. Their leadership and effective participation in decision-making process is still far behind than the men. It is found that many elected women in Panchayats and Municipalities are only leaders in name and the real authority is possessed either by the male family members or the male members of these bodies. Women members, at large are ignorant of governance. But, gradually they are learning to assert themselves, using their power for good of the community and are showing achievements. Women seem to be on the path of political empowerment at the grass-roots level, although at a slower pace.

Thus, the whole analysis presents a very disappointing picture of women's participation in the politics of the State. Although, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts have provided access to women to take part in politics at the grass-roots level in the State, yet their representation in the Parliament and State Assembly is woefully poor. Women are at a great disadvantage in power politics in the State. Their participation in politics and various other decision-making bodies is still marginal despite the fact that significant changes have taken place in the hill society. With a few exceptions women have remained outside the domain of power and political authority. The handful of women who have managed to make their way into the political system of the State have been able to do so because of their political patronage, high social or familial status. They come from affluent, politically active and well-connected families. The visible faces in the politics of Himachal Pradesh either belong to royal families or are wives, widows, daughters or daughters-in-law of prominent politicians. In other words, we may say that the 'Bibi-Beti-Bahu' syndrome is in operation to a great extent and the general women-folk is kept away from the politics.

WHY LOW PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS?

There are many factors which are responsible for the low participation of women in the politics of the State. As a matter of fact, the various socio-cultural, economic and political factors obstruct women from taking part in politics. Himachal women have to encounter many obstacles because of traditions, prejudices and social conditions of the hill society. Social traditions look women as a part of the household, not as a part of the public life. Politics is still regarded as Men's affairs and political life is generally considered to be a masculine activity. The male dominating society of ours is generally reluctant to accept women as decision-makers. The power is generally enjoyed by men in every field and at every layer of the society. As politics is mainly concerned with power so naturally women are kept out of it. Men like to retain their monopoly of power and do not want to share power with women. The mindset of the people as well as of the politicians still want to see women at the lowest level in the society as well as in politics. This is an irony that women can become the President, Prime Minister, Governors, Chief Ministers, conquer the Mount Everest, travel in the space, bear the administrative and judicial responsibilities, work in police and army, but the doors of politics are still narrow for them.

Most women themselves are also unwilling to join politics. There is a role perception among women that certain things are not worth doing for them and politics is one of them. The traditional and conservative outlook of women confines them to the domestic chores. Further, the engagements of women in household chores, child care, family responsibilities, and agricultural activities burden them extremely and refrain them from participating in the political activities because of lack of time.

The political parties are also reluctant to field the women candidates in the elections because of their perception that women have less prospects of winning the seats. The political parties do not want to give tickets to women despite the loud promises they make with regard to allotting party tickets to the women in the elections from time to time. They do not do justice with women while distributing the tickets. Surprisingly, about 50 percent of women's population also do not compel the political parties to field more women candidates from their side. The political parties make excuse of winnability criteria while allotting tickets to women. Further, it is also interesting to note that while all the political parties in principle support the Constitutional Amendments for 33 percent reservation for women in the Parliament and State Legislatures but no party has so far come forward to nominate this percentage of women for elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. In the recent past, a lot of hue and cry is being made over 'Women's Reservation Bill' by the different sections of the society including the various political parties, but nobody seems to be honest in this respect.

The various other reasons which discourage the women from participating in politics, mainly include – the criminalization of politics, lack of safety and security, lack of incentives, illiteracy, ignorance, lack of

political awareness and exposure to the outer world, lack of self-confidence, lack of time and resources at the disposal of the women.

HOW TO ENHANCE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS ?

Keeping in view the low participation of women in politics, the question now arises that what should be done to enhance the women's participation in politics. In order to enhance women's participation in politics, at the very outset, it is necessary to overcome the various hurdles that come in the way of their participation in politics. The spread of education, political awareness, competence, willingness, self-confidence and motivation among the women, and the encouragement and support from the family, society and political parties will help in bringing women in the mainstream of political arena.

No efforts of the government for the political equality and empowerment of women can be either effective or adequate unless women themselves become more conscious and aware about their political rights and duties. Women, on their own should also develop a positive attitude towards politics. Women should not confine themselves to the four walls of their houses but should come out of their domestic and traditional role assignments and spare time to take part in politics.

The spread of education among women can play a very vital role in bringing about desirable behavioural changes among the women and make them well equipped in terms of knowledge, awareness, skill, self-confidence and capacity to deal with different problems. Women's participation in politics to a great extent is influenced by their families. If women get the support and co-operation of their families, they will participate in politics with great enthusiasm and vigour. Hence, the family support and co-operation is necessary for enhancing participation of women in politics.

Further, political parties must encourage women to take part in political activities by providing them important offices in the party hierarchies, allotting them party tickets to contest the elections and if elected they must be encouraged by giving them important portfolios in the government and various other decision making bodies. There is a need for political parties to promote the candidature of more and more women. It should be made mandatory for every political party to field atleast 33 percent women candidates in the elections to the Parliament and State Legislatures. The political parties will have to increase their efforts to nominate women for winnable seats and not be contented to have female candidates as token of a commitment to gender equality.

Further, reservation of seats for women in the Parliament, State legislatures and various other decision-making bodies as in the case of PRIs and municipalities should be effectively adopted and implemented. If women can be given opportunities to show their leadership abilities and capabilities in the PRIs and Municipal bodies, why can not they be given representation in the Parliament and State legislatures

through reservation. The reservation would be an enabling step for women's political empowerment. However, reservation is just a means towards equality and not an end in itself. Mere reservation will not solve the problem unless and until women are given commensurate powers to function effectively.

It is also essential to discard criminalization of politics by taking stern action against the culprits. In our male dominated patriarchal society, sometimes, it has been seen that women political activists and even the elected women representatives become the victim of sexual abuse, exploitation, violence and harassment. The women should feel themselves secure and safe in all spheres including the politics. Unless and until, the fear of dirty politics from the minds of women is removed, their active participation in politics will not be possible.

To sum up, it may be said that women's equal participation in politics as voters, candidates, representatives and decision-makers is essential not only for the success of a democratic political system but it can also play a vital role in their advancement as well as in the reconstruction of the society. The political empowerment of women is a must for their all-round development. Women still have to climb many steps to be able to contribute equally in the political sphere like men. There is a need for qualitative changes in the socio-cultural, economic and political structure of the society so that more and more women take interest and active part in politics. It is hoped that in due course of time, the changes in the socio-political structure of the society will take place and more women will come into the mainstream of political arena.

REFERENCES:

1. A.K. Shukla, *Women Chief Ministers in Contemporary India* (New Delhi : APH Publishing Corporation, 2007), pp.112-13.
2. Benu Nayyar, "Status of Women in 21st Century India" in Meenu Agarwal (ed.), *Women Empowerment : Today's Vision for Tomorrow's Mission* (New Delhi : Mahamaya Publishing House, 2007), pp.286-87.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Statistical Outline of Himachal Pradesh, 2004-05* (Shimla : Department of Economic and Statistics, HP); and Divya Himachal, January 25, 2009, p.6.
5. *India Today*, "State of the States", Sep., 22, 2008, pp.34-51.
6. *Himachal Pradesh Mein Swatantrata Sangram Ka Sankshipt Itihas* (Shimla : Language and Culture Department, Govt. of Himachal Pradesh, 1992), pp.68-178; and *Swadhinta Ki Aur* (Shimla : Language and Culture Department, Govt. of Himachal Pradesh, 1993), pp.50-53.

7. *Who's Who, Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly, 1952-2007* (Shimla : H.P. Legislative Assembly Secretariat).
8. Bhawna Jharta, *Women and Politics in India* (New Delhi : Deep and Deep Publications, 1996), p.82.
9. *Himachal Pradesh Vidhan Sabha Ki Karyawahi, From Oct., 1952 to April 1956 and Oct., 1963 to March 1966* (Shimla : H.P. Vidhan Sabha Secretariat); and *Who's Who, Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly, 1952-2007*, Op.cit.
10. *Who's Who, Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly, 1952-2007* (Shimla : H.P. Legislative Assembly Secretariat).
11. Lok Sabha, *Who's Who, 1st to 14th Lok Sabha*, (New Delhi : Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2005).
12. Rajya Sabha, *Who's Who, From 1968 to 2007* (New Delhi : Rajya Sabha Secretariat, 2007).
13. *The Tribune*, April 9, 2008, p.4.