

Elections and Women Card: RSTV – The Big Picture

Anchor: Vishal Dahiya

Guests: Aditi Phadnis, Political Editor of the Business Standard; Chakshu Roy, PRS Legislative Research; Pallavi Sharma, Spokesperson, Indian National Congress and Anila Singh, Spokesperson Bhartiya Janata Party.

Why in the news?

- The biggest festival of democracy, i.e. the General Elections, has begun in India and almost 50 per cent of the total 90 crore voters this time are women.
- The turnout of women voters has seen a rapid increase over the last few years with the highest being at 65.5 per cent in the previous Lok Sabha elections, in 2014.
- However, the scenario is entirely different when we talk about political equality to women.
- According to a study conducted by 'Association of Democratic Reforms', less than 10 per cent of the candidates who contested elections in the recent past are women.
- This is a far cry from the demand to give 33 per cent reservation to women in political parties and government.
- For the General election this time, so far, two regional parties have announced reservation for women in ticket distribution – Biju Janta Dal in Odisha has given 33 percent and Trinamool Congress in West Bengal has given 41.5 per cent of its tickets to women candidates.
- What does this move indicate and will it make other political parties open their doors for women at the same scale?

Analysis by the Experts:

We look at these two announcements, specifically from the BJD and the Trinamool Congress of 33% and 41.5% in terms of reservation for women in terms of the tickets being distributed. What are these two parties trying to indicate?

Aditi Phadnis, Political Editor of the Business Standard, weighed in with her arguments here.

- Well, I believe that it is quite clear that they want positive bias in terms of women's representation.
- We have so far seen that the outcome of these kinds of moves has not been very edifying.
- It still has to be seen if the women candidates being given tickets are the sisters, brothers and wives of politicians, who are the main people who would be calling the shots from behind.
- Having said this, it is important to note that women's participation in elections as candidates have been falling. I believe that there is a strong lobby that would militate against the Centre taking a cue from these two states.
- It is important that we as women see what kind of women are being attracted into the legislature.

In terms of elected representatives and the kind of trend that we have seen- the numbers don't look very good in terms of representation. Your thoughts...

Chakshu Roy, PRS Legislative Research, weighed in with his arguments here.

- If we look at representation in Parliament, across the last 60 years, the representation of women members in the Lok Sabha has never gone beyond about 12%. Further, in the state assemblies, the number is no better.
- As a matter of fact, in the state assemblies, the number would be even lesser. There is some progress that has been made towards the representation of women in legislatures.
- However, let's also talk about as to why this representation in legislatures is important. The constitution talks about an equality of sexes. Thus, one way to get to that is to put together some kind of an action plan which can translate into better representation.
- The other part of reservations is that studies have indicated that if there is a reservation for a particular segment, then that redistributes resources in their favour.
- Over the years, there have been instances where attempts have been made towards bringing a law for reservation in legislatures. Unfortunately, those attempts have not been successful.

- However, there has been a successful attempt where there has been a 50% reservation at the Panchayat level that has happened.
- Ultimately, there is a need to have this conversation and what better a time to have this conversation than at a time when the elections are on and the ticket distribution is taking place.

If you look at the situation currently and the announcement that has been made by the two regional parties, i.e. the BJD and the Trinamool Congress, is it time for National parties to emulate their example and bring in more women as candidates?

Anila Singh, Spokesperson Bhartiya Janata Party, weighed in with her arguments here.

- It is going to be a very ideal situation if all the political parties respect this type of representation in their own political party. Women politicians were striving to get 33% reservation passed in their favour- although this has not happened so far, maybe it would happen in the near future.
- However, if we talk of personal representation of women in their own political parties, then the moves taken up by the TMC and the BJD is a welcome step.
- This is something that women politicians appreciate. However, at the same time, it is important to look at numbers. For example, how many women representatives are there in your party? How many tickets are you willing to give them? Are the women candidates strong enough to contest elections?
- In our country at the moment, we have the first full-time Raksha Mantri who is a lady. So definitely, we welcome this step. The more women we have in Government, the merrier the situation is. However, I strongly advocate that whatever representation we find, it should be qualitative.

As a representative of the ruling party, do you see things happening within your own party as well? The general elections are around the corner and we are going to soon have the list of candidates being announced as well. What's the plan for your party?

Anila Singh, Spokesperson Bhartiya Janata Party, weighed in with her arguments to this question.

- We are hoping that we are going to have more participation in the upcoming general elections.
- However, at the same time, in our party, the parliamentary board decides as to what the whole game plan is going to be and who is going to contest the elections.
- However, I would definitely want the reservation to the tune of 33% for women to be implemented in my part as well. I believe that any women politician across party lines would like to have that type of representation in her own party.

You may also have certain examples from your party as Anila had. However, when we talk about ticket distribution or more women candidates being out forward by the national parties, the Congress doesn't seem to be doing much when compared to its counterpart which is the BJP.

Pallavi Sharma, Spokesperson, Indian National Congress, weighed in with her arguments here.

- I completely agree with the fact that the representation of women in terms of the political arena has been miserable. This is true from independence, and since the polity of the country has begun. Unfortunately, in my opinion, it is surprising that although the present Government is in majority in the Lok Sabha, it has failed to pass this bill in Parliament.
- Also, let's not forget that in 2010, when the Congress Government was in power, the bill got cleared in the Rajya Sabha- the bill was passed by the Rajya Sabha, but it lapsed eventually.
- As of now, the party president of the Indian National Congress, Rahul Gandhi, and Sonia Gandhi who is the Chairperson of the Indian National Congress have written repeated letters to the Prime Minister of India, asking for the bill to be passed. The Congress CWC meeting was held recently, and we can assure the people that this time, there would be adequate women representation.
- Having said this, I would like to bring out as to why the efforts taken by individual parties are not going to yield that much result as much as the bill getting passed would do so. It is important to note that women may not be successful even if they are given a ticket. Thus, this is one thing that holds political parties back. However, when you have the bill that is passed, there would be certain seats that would have to be reserved for women. Thus, all political parties on that particular seat will have to give women representation. Thus, at the end, whoever ends up winning that seat would land up being a women.

This gives a boost to political parties also- that since a particular seat is reserved for women, the political parties

have to ensure women representation from that seat.

Well, we have heard the representatives of both the national parties- both of them sound confident on receiving a bit of push from their respective political parties. However, the criteria of winnability seems to be the stumbling block. Your thoughts...

Aditi Phadnis, Political Editor of the Business Standard, weighed in here with her arguments.

Winnability always is the stumbling block. From the point of view of political parties, I don't really fault them. It is true that every political party would like to win, and regardless of sex, they would want whichever candidate they field to win. However, having said that, we are not even seeing on an experimental basis, (like Nitish Kumar did at the Panchayat level), an empowerment of women by reservation at the local levels even in the state legislatures where these parties are in power.

This trend that we have been observing is a secular trend, cutting across political lines. It is important to note that the conscientious dissenters- i.e. the Samajwadi Party, and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), will continue to dissent. Thus, I don't really see much of a future for a legislative push as far as statutory reservation for women is concerned in the near future.

Chakshu Roy, PRS Legislative Research, weighed in here with his observations.

I believe that there are a few things that need to be looked into. There are multiple ways in which we in India have thought about reservation. One way is reservation at the legislature level, thus, here, you reserve constituencies where only women candidates are allowed to fight the election. But the negative side of this is that it restricts the choice of voters to only those candidates.

The other way to do it is that there are countries like France, Sweden, etc. and what they have done is that they have made quotas for women within political parties. This is another mechanism which can be taken into account. That bill that came into parliament which was earlier referred to in the discussion talked about rotating constituencies. Thus, there would be a constituency which would be reserved for women and then after sometime, a different constituency would be reserved. However, this restricts the individual's incentive to work for their constituents. This is because, if I am a man, and I am working for my constituency, and I know that in the next general election, it will be labelled a women constituency, then what would be my incentive towards working for my constituency? This is a question that can be naturally asked.

Another variation is that you have dual member constituencies. However, all of these things require discussions and deliberations.

It is also important to note that the legislation that lapsed, did so in the 15th Lok Sabha, it was passed by the Rajya Sabha and it went to the Lok Sabha, and didn't get passed in the Lok Sabha. So, when the current Lok Sabha started (i.e. the 16th Lok Sabha in the year 2014), there was no such legislation in the house. A fresh bill had to be introduced which was not done.

If you look at the entire situation, the criteria of winnability is again the biggest stumbling block, that is in front of political parties- the idea of reservation of women candidates has faced opposition.

Anila Singh, Spokesperson Bhartiya Janata Party, weighed in with her arguments to this question.

- You are right in a way. Even the Indian National Congress has been in power for many years and they were in thumping majority for many years.
- However, they never took any concrete steps towards women representation.
- Thus, let us not play this blame game. I believe that women candidates are very competent to win elections. It is a myth that women candidates are not competent enough to win elections. If we talk about the women reservation patterns in the local body elections, there are thousands of women who find representation and they are doing really well.
- Further, all of them are not proxy candidates or proxy representatives. There are many of them who are doing very well. Further, survey and research has proved that whenever women representatives are there, the progressive work that has been done has been much more than what male representatives have done. However, I believe that along with quantity, it is the qualitative representation which should also be there. It would be better if political parties don't just give women tickets to contest elections in constituencies where they believe that they have a poor chance of winning.

What are the major political hurdles which your party (the BJP) and other parties face in not giving due

representation to women?

Anila Singh, Spokesperson Bhartiya Janata Party, weighed in with her arguments to this question.

I believe that it is a social and cultural hurdle. Even in today's date, if you ask any of the parents, as to what they would want their daughter to be in the future. Parents would prefer their children becoming doctors, engineers, MBA degree holder, etc. They will hardly, if ever, say that I would like my daughter to become a politician. Thus, the social and cultural hurdles need to be addressed. Women are very competent, very hard working. And they have proved earlier also that they can give 100% results.

Further, ever since the 2014 administration came into power, the Prime Minister has taken initiatives to further the cause of women empowerment and has even helped girls become more responsible, and become responsible social citizens by giving them different opportunities and schemes.

Do you agree that the biggest hurdles are the social and cultural situations?

Pallavi Sharma, Spokesperson, Indian National Congress, weighed in with her arguments here.

- Yes, I completely agree with Anila on this. There are still some social, cultural factors and traditional factors that hinder women. As a matter of fact, women on their own also are reluctant in terms of putting a foot forward in the political field, because of various notions, beliefs and traumas that go with it. This is totally understandable, but women need to be encouraged. At least the women who are coming forward need to be encouraged and reservation is one such push that you can give these women who have decided to enter the political arena.
- Also, although for 70 years, the bill did not get passed, I believe that 5 years is what the Government gives to parties to put its performance on the table. As a matter of fact, when the BJP was contesting the 2014 elections, it made sure that women's reservation was a part of its manifesto, then in 5 years, why did the party fail in getting it passed?
- The bill was drafted and various stakeholders had been consulted, it only had to be revived. The present administration could have got it passed very easily.
- Secondly, coming to the idea of the dual member constituency, I am totally against the idea of the dual member constituency, this is because on some scale it takes away the representation from women. Women need to be given their own share of reservation.

Aditi Phadnis, Political Editor of the Business Standard, weighed in with her arguments here.

I believe that there are things that hold women back from taking a position in public life. The same rules and reservations applied to other professions some years ago. This in my view has changed in other professions, but unfortunately, it has not changed in politics. Although there are many more women coming forward, the gap continues to be the same.

PM Modi has done a lot to empower women. But, that is just a drop in the ocean. In the sense that one is just saving women from drowning or from becoming invisible. This is not what is needed. What is needed is much more than that. There is a large distance that needs to be traversed from where we are currently as far as women's empowerment is concerned.

I am not sure if reservation is the only way out. There are other ways as well, I am certain. However, a lot more visible thought has to be given as to how women can play a bigger role in public life. This is because ultimately, that is what changes ideas. And as a result, that is what changes society.

Chakshu Roy, PRS Legislative Research, weighed in with his arguments here.

I believe that more 'cross-party dialogue' is needed. Also, more consensus building is the need of the hour. I believe that it is great that these conversations are happening now when elections are impending. However, I wish that these conversations continue to happen even after elections finish and the Government which comes into power can then take these conversations further. Consensus building and having these conversations is going to be the key in so far as having some sort of a reservation for women in Parliament is concerned.

