

Role of Women Wings of Major Political Parties in India – A Critique

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Abstract – As the caretakers of democracy, political parties are very important actors in the promotion of women's inclusion in democratic institutions. They have shown interest in women's problems in the last few decades. Members of political parties regularly create supporting groups around different issues and demographics, like Youth wings, Students wings and Women wings. Women wings are the central core of politics. For this reason these wings are the main entrypoint of women to participation in political activities. These bodies are generally aimed at supporting women who run for office and or seek senior leadership arrangements in the party, along with influence the party's agenda with respect to policies concerning women. Political party wings and parliamentary bodies independently play a major role in improving women's political representation and leadership, they can achieve their goals successfully when they strategically work together even in a challenging political climate.

Keywords: Political Participation, Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Political Awakening, Women Activism.

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In general political parties utilize the women candidates during elections to mobilize womenfolk. These women wings work within the limitations of the party and try to raise some important issues, like price rise, world peace, crime against women etc. Political parties do not give proper place to women as far as contesting elections is concerned because of the winnability factor. If the political parties support equitable representation of women wings in party leadership and decision making structure and create opportunities to establish women's network that link women from political parties and civil society organizations then the participation of women in politics and political activities will surely increase.

The major political parties in India too have been undertaking some such steps to increase the contribution of women in politics, though these are still half hearted attempts.

One of the major steps undertaken by the various political parties in India, has been establishing their women wings. The present paper attempts to study the creation of women wings by the three major national parties in India namely, Congress, BJP and CPI (M). The paper represents the objectives, organization and role of these women wings.

Conceptually it may be stated that a women's wing is a group which is associated with a political party that consists of that party's female membership. Women wings encourage women for participating in politics.

These wings are provides a space to identify political issues and party policies that are most salient to women voters. The aim of these wings is to promote women to join formal party structure and to allow them to do so in a more comfortable situation, without men. Women wings work to advocate gender equality and women's empowerment. The women wings are committed to offering empowerment to women across the world.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN WINGS:

Women wings should be viewed as one opportunity that is responsible for ensuring the encouragement of gender equality within political parties. Political parties are among the most important institutions for the participation of women in politics. Civil society ought to capitalize on the existence of women wings to demand change within political parties. The influence that women have within political parties is consequently a key determinant of their prospects for political empowerment, particularly at the national level. Women wings should consider taking their political parties to task when it comes to nominating candidates to run for elections. This is because it is more complicated to win elections without the backing of a political institute especially at the national level (Chingamuka, 2009). In addition, political parties should prioritise providing resources to women wings so that they can fully carry out their mandate.

Political parties grow when women not only participate in the electoral and governing processes, but also control them. Superficial efforts to increase the number of women mixed up in politics that offer no real qualitative influence or decision making power are unlikely to produce any new or immediate benefits (Ballington, 2012).

Women wings usually perform some or all the following activities :-

- ▶ Coordinate the activities of women members of the party.
- ▶ Contribute to policy development, encourage women's interests and recommend party leadership on gender issues.
- ▶ Provide training programs for newly elected members and office holders.
- ▶ Contribute to the implementation of gender equality policies, including the implementation of quotas in the candidates' recruitment process [3]
- ▶ Promote women's leadership throughout the party, at both the local and national level.
- ▶ Reach out to male party members.
- ▶ Organize conferences, exhibitions, publish literature and conduct surveys on women's issues.

Membership in the women wings:-

1. Automatic – all the women party members are the members of the women's wing.
2. Free choice:- its membership is a free choice, for each women party member.
3. Women be able to connect with women's wing moreover as full members or auxiliary members lacking of necessity as well joining the party [4].

The leader of the women's wing is proposed and elected by the party members at the general meeting of the party's local branch.

Let us first we explore the Indian National Congress Party and its women's wing: All India Mahila Congress (AIMC).

The **Congress Party** is one of the oldest parties in India. It was emerged in 1885 at the initiative of Mr. A.O. Hume. The main aims of the party as stated in its constitution are the welfare and development of the people and the formation in India, by nonviolent and legitimate means. The party established a

collective situation support on Parliamentary democratic state in which there is equal opportunity of people which aims at world peace and fellowship [5]

Looking at Congress Party's attitude towards women we find that the efforts have been made for the upliftment and empowerment of women. The party constitution now has included a provision that 50 percent of the seats at different committees shall be reserved for women [6].

The first step taken by the Congress party towards political upgradation of the women, to educate them and make them conscious of their political position and status was undertaken in 1952 when Congress was established their women's wing which entitled women's cell. In the starting, Mahila Congress was a common group and was implement the different types of actions of women and child interests. It was known as separate body in 1983, by means of the Frontal Organization of the AICC from a Women's Cell or a Women's Wing. A meeting of congresswomen go to the AICC session was held at Shanmugam Hall, Bombay on 21 October 1983 along with the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi (Ranjana and Anju, 1994). Mahila Congress inaugurated the new Headquarters at No.1, Talkatora Road, New Delhi on 17 November 1983. The first session of Mahila Congress was held at Bangalore on 15-16 September 1984. A draft constitution was framed at the meeting which converted the Mahila Congress Cell into a Frontal Organization and named it as **All India Mahila Congress (AIMC)**. It was decided to set up units of the Mahila Congress from the National, State, District and Block level [8]. Smt. Abida Begum was the first President of the AIMC and Smt. Margaret Alwa was the Convener.

This organization claims to work to bring all the necessary changes in the society for the betterment and upliftment of the half of the population of India, the women.

The aims of the Mahila Congress are stated to ensure women's participation in public life, end of intolerance, improve the conditions of working women and end superstitions to promote a scientific temper, peace and communal harmony, sustainable development advancement and empowerment of women and right to live with dignity to all. The party wants to increase the knowledge of global problems and present solutions. They want to change the world in order to make it a better position to live [9]. They allow them to contribute towards the recognition of a secular, socialist and democratic India.

The Pradesh Mahila Congress is represented to AIMC in all the states of the Indian Union. The

current National President is Sushmita Dev and Delhi State President is Sharmistha Mukherjee.

The Delhi Pradesh Congress writes in its stated objectives: Mahila Congress is a premier organization dedicated to welfare of women. Though each human being is different but there are certain common values and interests which make a strong bond among them and inspire to help each other. All India Mahila Congress is the major democratic and secular women's organization in the world that represents aspirations of millions of women. Mahila Congress, since its formation has been the torch holder of women activism and motivated millions of women. Mahila Congress is already in the forefront to protect the rights and interests of women, regardless of caste and creed, religion and the social status. Mahila Congress has been embarked on revolutionary journey which will bring women leaders from the grassroot. The doors of Mahila Congress are open to everyone and the process to nominate, elect and to groom women leaders is on. Mahila Congress at present has a million plus members crosswise the country. The Mahila Congress motto of "Empowered Women _ Empowers India" is achieved through women leaders and its grand network of members" [10].

Organization of AIMC :-

AIMC is a four tier organization. The Committees of AIMC are :-

- The National council.
- The Pradesh/Territorial Mahila Congress Committee (PMC).
- The District/City Mahila Congress Committee (DMC).
- The Block/Ward Mahila Congress Committee (BMC) [11].

Functions of AIMC:-

The All India Mahila Congress plays an important role in the political, social and organizational levels.

As per the Constitution of AIMC in social field they support women in their fight for gender equality, justice and safety. They bring women together from different walks of life to help create a progressive and just society as promised in our constitution.

On the Political level, they work for the political awakening and larger participation of women in political and governance institutions. AIMC raise their voice on the issue of 33 percent women's reservation bill in all elected bodies from panchayat to parliament.

On the organizational level, they create the train ground for women who want to participate in politics and take up all such activities that are necessary for and incidental to the objectives of the Mahila Congress and congress [12].

A look at the manifesto of Indian National Congress indicates that the party has special programmes and promises for the empowerment of women. It promises to implement Indira Mahila Yojana and National Perspective Plan for Women (Arya, 2000). AIMC has been active in mobilizing women in support of the party. In recent years it has been voicing the demand of women workers within the party. Exclusion from the decision making bodies within the party is responsible for considerable resentment among women political workers (The Indian Express, 2018).

The Mahila Congress has been raising the issue of giving more representation to women by the party when the candidates for various elections are chosen. Theoretically the Congress party has agreed to reserve 50 percent seats in different party committees but the ground reality is different. Women still do not get equal seats even within the party organization and its committees. During selection of party candidates for various elections the winnability criteria often goes against women candidates. However the State level Mahila Congress Committees and the AIMC have been providing political support to the main party whenever women related issues are raised.

Looking at some of the recent activities of the All India Mahila Congress, it may stated that AIMC observed a 'black day' on April 17, 2018 at district level across the country adding that the party is fighting for the cause of women and justice for Unnao and Kathua rape cases. AIMC issued a 'charge sheet' against the present government, claiming that the government has completely failed to empower women and provide them safety (North East News, 2018).

The Meghalaya Pradesh Mahila Congress on September 8, 2018 staged a protest march in opposition to price rise in the country and criticized the NDA government and Prime Minister Narinder Modi for bringing suffering to the universal community. The Congress protesters raised placards demanding the NDA government to roll back the price of cooking gas, diesel, petrol and train fare [16].

However it is a stark reality that the AIMC and its state level units are not very active most of time. An occasional protest march or a demonstration does not make them relevant to politics. They must become more pro-active if they really want to earn a respectable space for women in general and their organization in particular.

The **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)** is the successor of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh which till recently represented the conservative section in Indian politics and support for a culturally nationalist ideology.

It was recognized in 1980 as Bharatiya Janata Party, though its roots lie in the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, created in 1951 by Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. For the 1977 general elections, the Jana Sangh had combined with some other parties to form Janata Party. Following differences within the Janata Party, the rank and file of the erstwhile Jana Sangh broke away and reconvened and rechristened the new party as Bharatiya Janata Party.

The BJP as per its party constitution wants to set up a democratic state which promises to all citizens regardless of caste, creed or sex, political, social and economic justice, equal opportunity and liberty of faith and expression [17].

The Bharatiya Janata Party constituted a women's wing named '**Mahila Morcha**' in April 1980 with a vision to uplift "the socio-economic and political status of women in India". National Mahila Morcha has been actively and progressively working in all 29 states and 7 union territories of India. The BJP proclaims that it is a women's wing of "world's largest political organization". Making a separate wing for women within the party in the name of 'Mahila Morcha' was a brain-child of late Rajmata Vijaya Raje Scindia of Gwalior, who was also a co-founder of Jan Sangh and fully dedicated worker of the party. Rajmata was the first coordinator whereas Mridula Sinha was the first Assistant Coordinator of Mahila Morcha (Susheela, 1993). In 1986, Mridula Sinha was appointed President of Bharatiya Mahila Morcha. On July 03, 2015 Daggubati Purandeswari was appointed in-charge of BJP Mahila Morcha. At present, Vijaya Rahatkar, is the National President of the Wing.

Mahila Morcha represents the women power in BJP which also strengthens the organisation. Due to its platform it involves women of all caste, creeds and colour, this connects women of all levels from rich to poor to the party. Mahila Morcha is a strong wing of BJP that attends not only to the problems of the women across the country but also to build the image and influence of the party among people and all sections of the society.

The main objectives of Mahila Morcha are stated as:

1. to raise social awareness among women and strengthen their nationality;
2. to struggle against economic, social and political injustice;
3. to build a free new society based on social equality and justice;

4. to revive India's ancient civilization and traditional values;
5. Also to apply scientific ways [19].

The meetings of Mahila Morcha Central Committee are held once in six months. Discussions are held on national problems as well as state issues. Apart from this, the BJP Mahila Morcha hold meetings, seminars, dharanas, protest, etc. at national as well as state levels [20].

During the 2014, general elections, BJP Delhi Pradesh Mahila Morcha started a campaign 'Jan-Jan Modi, Ghar-Ghar Modi' a public interaction program for securing votes in favour of BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate Narendra Modi.

Mahila Morcha had also organized 'Hum se Miliye, Modi Ko Janiye' program with several voluntary organizations on Holi March 17, 2014 where women from minority community were also asked participate in large numbers in this program (Lyngdoh, 2017).

Mahila Morcha's National President Vijaya Rahatkar observed that the criminals and anti-social elements have no fear of law. Women and children feel unprotected. Sexual assaults are also on the rise. So she required direct set up of a special court to fast-track cases under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (Pocso). The BJP leader also raised a demand to the state government to implement the compensation scheme for victims of gender crimes. The BJP workers a door to door campaign to create awareness about the centre's policies and scheme that are being implemented in the country (Rajendra, 2018).

Madhya Pradesh Mahila Morcha State President Lata Elker raised a demand for giving tickets to more women in assembly elections. She said that the women's wing of the state BJP has urged the party leaders to double the number of tickets to women as compared to that of the previous polls. The party should believe in giving at least 25 percent tickets to women in these elections as against 12 percent of the total candidates fielded by the BJP in the state in 2013 assembly elections. She said that the women candidates also fit in the winnability criteria [23].

However looking at the meagre number of women in the present BJP led government and the BJP MPs the gap between theory and practice becomes evident. In reality women are under represented at the political level because of lack of political power in their hands.

The **Communist party of India (Marxist)** is one of the largest part organized parties in India. The CPI (M) was created at the seventh Congress of the

communist party of India held in Calcutta from October 31 to November 7, 1964. The CPI (M) was emerged in the struggle against revisionism and sectarianism in the communist movement at the international and national level. The party came out from a split from the communist party of India in 1964. In Kerala Legislative Assembly elections of 1965 the party has implemented the name Communist Party of India (Marxist) to take its election symbol from the election commission of India [24]. CPI (Marxist leninist) supporter of armed struggle and criticized participation in Parliamentary elections and work in mass movements. Initially the party leaders were Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal.

The purposes of the party are stated to be socialism and communism during the organization of the state of dictatorship of the proletariat. The party keeps high the banner of proletarian internationalism (Bala, 1999).

The CPI (M)'s earlier understanding and stand had been virtually the same. The recent documents of the Party and of its mass organizations however, reveal a greater awareness of women's problems as well as of the party's own failure to take up women's issues at all levels. Organizationally, the party has supported the formation (a) of an all India coordination committee of working women within the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) following a national conference and (b) the All India Democratic Women's Association, a national body which brings together state level organization for the first time [26]. These organizations specifically point out on the problems of women, to attempt establish linkages between women's issues and the broader ideology of the movement.

The **All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA)** is the women's wing of the CPI (M). Pappa Umanath was the founding father of the Democratic Women's Association in Tamil Nadu in 1973, working for women's rights and for their education, employment and status, along with issues like castes, communalism, child rights and helps in any tragedy. A number of other organizations developed, and the united All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) was recognized in 1981. The founding of the AIDWA raised high hopes on this front and it has been active in fighting for women's rights and gender issues. The first National meeting of AIWDA was held at Chennai with delegates from 12 state representing 5,90,000 members [27].

AIDWA is an autonomous left oriented women's organization devoted to attaining democracy, equality and women's freedom. AIDWA members are from all stratum in society, regardless of class, caste and society. It has an executive existence in 22 states in India, with a current membership of more than 9 million. About 2/3rd of the organization's

strength is derivative from underprivileged rural and urban women [28].

AIDWA was established in 1981 as a national level organization of women. However, a number of state units of the organization came into existence in the crucible of the freedom struggle, each with a estimable record of anti-imperialist and pro-working class actions [29].

AIDWA believes in the freedom of women in India. It encourages secular principles and challenges and refuses to accept cultural practices which humiliating to women.

The AIDWA mainly undertook two types of functions in the context of women:

1. To represent individual women's issues which have a bearing on the political issues and development?
2. To organize protest rallies, campaigns and demonstrations around specific issues like dowry; Muslim women's rights (Right to Maintenance Bill); the Sati Bill, and women's employment, wages, etc.

Apart from specific women's issues, AIDWA believes that the women's movement should forge its links with the political movement and organizations and thereby place it on the national agenda. Campaigns, rallies and celebrations of International Women's Day at the national, regional and local levels are the main methods of educating common women for C.P.I. (M). In addition to it, the state units and districts units of AIDWA conduct regular classes for the women activists. Among other subjects, which they discuss are on Marxism, women's status, women and law, roots of women's oppression, religious fundamentalism, role of women movements etc. [30]

Brinda Karat became the first women member of the CPI (M) politbureau in 2005. She has also been the general secretary of the AIDWA from 1993 to 2004 and thereafter its Vice President. After Brinda Karat, Subhasini Ali became the second women member of CPI (M) politbureau in 2015. She was the former President of AIDWA [31].

At present Malini Bhattacharya is the president of AIDWA. Marriam Dhawale is the general secretary of AIDWA.

AIDWA raised a large number of issues such as equal rights to women and social, educational, cultural and economic advancement of women. However this did not bring about any major changes in the state of affairs. 'The Vijayawada Congress documents speak volumes about the situation of women's organizations and their participation in the party leadership (Santha, 2015).

It has declared itself as opposed to any kind of discrimination against women. It is critical of the poor progress in the field of women's welfare since independence and demands greater facilities for women's education removal of social disabilities, equal rights in matters of marriage, admission to professions and other services and equal pay for equal work [33].

The CPI (M) has started, All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM), which is a platform for Women from the Dalit community to raise their voice for justice. This stage has increased several efforts and movement for self respect and dignity. The main motive of this Manch is to accept the class, caste and gender identity of a Dalit woman and empower these Dalit women to gender hierarchies and promote their struggle for justice [34].

AIDMAM was started in 2006 by convener Vimal Thorat and general secretary, Asha Kowtal. They mostly work in North India and have interfered in 6 states Haryana, Orissa, Punjab, Bihar, Delhi and Rajasthan. They monitor violent behavior in against to Dalit women and also perform on these issues which assisted their supportive attempts. In 2014, they started a dalit women's self respect Yatra, for the reason of fight against violent behavior against dalit women (Panday, 2015). AIDMAM held additional marches in 2018. Also in 2018. They open a "side event" at the 38th session of the United Nations Human Rights council which integrated statement of caste based violence against women. A social media campaign called Dalit women Fight, is used by AIDMAM to increase support for their work [36].

In conclusion it may be stated that women wings are internal sections that want to make stronger women's image and participation in the party and in the political development in general. Women's representation in the legislative and executive bodies greatly depends on their representation in political parties, there is need for the major political parties to take appropriate initiatives to expand such party representation. In this regard they may, at least, practice the female quota in political parties. This system of female quota of political parties does exist in countries such Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Germany.³⁶In India, there is need for the women wings to being more active to their activities and functions, convene regular meetings (half yearly and yearly) and hold seminars, training events and organize conferences to time to time to increasing the confidence and number of women in politics locally and nationally. Parties would create more interaction between women wings and the main party organization. To this end, one would assume that women wings of political parties are concerned about the position of women in society and as such ensure that political parties respect and promote women rights. In addition it is the political will or commitment of top leaders that remains most critical to adopt and

implement all the above measures suggested for ending gender based discrimination and expanding female representation and participation in various domains of governance. But on the other hand though women are there in each party, but their actual involvement in decision making process is hardly observed barring a few exceptions.

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