



POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA: A STUDY ON Smt. INDIRA GANDHI

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Empowerment implies the creation of an enabling environment where individuals can fully use their capabilities to take charge of their lives. Empowerment also implies the building or acquiring of capacity to accomplish certain tasks and attain specific goals.

In the area of women's political empowerment, it is increasingly becoming recognized that women should both empower themselves and 'be empowered'. This relates both to individual (such as increasing individual civic competencies) and collective empowerment (such as networking). Empowerment also involves creating a conducive environment so that women can use these competencies to address the fundamental problems of society at par with their male counterparts.

It follows therefore that building the analytical, political, advocacy, leadership, networking and other competencies of women is just as important or even more important than increasing women's numbers in high policy and decision making bodies and institutions. It can even be argued that these qualitative factors provide the foundation for sustainable improvements in the position of women. Otherwise, legislative or constitutional mandates (or any other situations where the existing male dominated power structures are required to 'do favours' for women – for instance by appointing them to the cabinet) may merely result in tokenism, manipulation and unsustainable representation.

The aim of this paper is to explain the contribution of Smt. Indira Gandhi as a successful political executive who ruled our country for a period of nearly fifteen years.

Independent India has produced many Prime Ministers but among them Indira Gandhi was only woman to be elected as the Prime Minister. She impressed all sections of people not only with her charisma, but also courage, initiative, spontaneous decision-making, leadership, and innovative capabilities. She had a great vision towards the development of India. She had more concern towards the poor and it could be noticed with her slogan of "Garibi Hatao" (Abolishing of poverty). She is also regarded as the most controversial political leader of the country for her unprecedented decision of imposing 'a state of emergency'. Undoubtedly she remained as one of the greatest political leaders of India. The dedication of Mrs. Gandhi towards the nation could be observed from her own words given below:



“Even if I died in the service of the nation, I would be proud of it. Every drop of my blood..... will contribute to the growth of this nation and to make it strong and dynamic”.

Indira Gandhi

Indira ‘Priyadarshini’ Gandhi was born on 19th November, 1917, in Allahabad to Kamala and Jawaharlal Nehru. Her father Nehru took an active part in freedom movement and because of the political back ground of her family, Indira Gandhi was exposed to politics when she was a little child. A leader like Mahatma Gandhi was among the frequent visitors of the Nehru’s house in Allahabad. She had her school education in Shantiniketan in West Bengal, Pune University, Switzerland and Oxford University in London.

The leadership qualities of Mrs. Gandhi could be seen from the childhood that itself. At the age of twelve, she joined in the ‘Monkey Brigade’ group which was formed by the congress to fight against British rule. With her leadership qualities soon she became a leader of that group and delivered speeches while other children actually warned the people who were going to be arrested. Though the other children had fear towards British government, but Indira did not have the same and fought against their rule. She started her political career in 1938 by joining as a member of Indian National Congress Party.

Indira has fell in love with Feroze Khan, but her father Nehru did not like the idea of his daughter marrying and sought Mahatma Gandhi’s help to dissuade their love relationship. Indira was very stubborn regarding her love with Feroze and did not change her idea of marrying him. Mahatma Gandhi as a solution adopted Feroze Khan and gave him his name. At last her marriage took place in 1942 according to the Hindu rituals. The above incident shows that how strong Indira’s feelings were in getting inter-caste marriage in those days. The uncompromising nature of Indira’s personality can be noticed with this incident. She gave birth to two male children, Rajeev and Sanjay.

When India gets Independence in 1947, Nehru became the first Prime Minister. Indira took political training from her father by acted as hostess and confidante and traveled with Nehru to meet famous political figures. In 1959 Indira Gandhi became the fourth woman elected president of the Indian National Congress. After her father’s death, the new Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri appointed Indira Gandhi as the Minister of Information and Broad Casting. This position was the fourth highest ranking position in the Cabinet. Many Indians were illiterate. Therefore, radio and television played a major part in informing them. As minister, she most importantly encouraged the making of inexpensive radios and started a family planning programme. As a cabinet minister for a first time, she started her involvement in the decision making process in Shastri’s cabinet.

After Shastri’s death in 1966, Indira Gandhi attained highest position and served as Prime Minister until India held the next election. She won that election, and



in 1967, became one of the first women ever elected to lead a democracy. When Gandhi became Prime Minister in 1966, the congress party was split into two fractions, the socialists led by Gandhi and the conservatives led by Morarji Desai. In 1969 after many disagreements with Desai, the Indian National Congress split. Here an opportunity has come to Indira to prove herself as the best leader. She took support from socialist and communist parties and ruled our country for the next two years. During this time for the first time, she took a daring and dashing step in the year 1969 by abolishing Privy Purses and Nationalization of Fourteen Banks at a time.

Indira faced several challenges from other countries during her Prime Ministership. Due to the atrocities of Pakistan army against the East Pakistan civilians, India has extended its support to the people of East Pakistan. Whereas US government under the Presidentship of Nixon supported Pakistan and humiliated Mrs. Gandhi. But Indira acted as a real statesman and diplomat at this time. Eventually the war took place between India and Pakistan in the year 1971 and India won the war and as a result Bangladesh was born. This was the first victory of Mrs. Gandhi as a political executive. To teach a lesson to the Nixon government, Indira brilliantly made friendship with the Russian Government and signed the treaty of friendship and cooperation.

The next step of her foreign policy was began by inviting the late Pakistani President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to Shimla for a week-long summit. After the near-failure of the talks, the two heads of state eventually signed the 'Shimla Agreement', which bound the two countries to resolve the Kashmir dispute by negotiations and peaceful means. Due to her antipathy for Nixon, relations with the United States grew distant, while relations with the Soviet Union grew closer.

Indira's government faced major problems after her tremendous mandate of 1971. The internal structure of the Congress Party had withered following its numerous splits, leaving it entirely dependent on her leadership for its election fortunes. "Garibi Hatao" (Eradicate Poverty) was the theme for Gandhi's 1971 bid. This slogan gave Gandhi an independent national support from all sections of the people.

Her success in election gave strength to Mrs. Gandhi and turns her attention towards the development of nation by introducing various changes in the existing system. She had great initiation towards carrying out innovations. Consequently she turned her attention towards the development of Science and Technology. As a result in 1974, India successfully conducted an under ground Nuclear test, unofficially code named as 'Smiling Budha', near the desert village of Pokhran in Rajasthan. With the success of this experiment, India became the World's youngest Nuclear power and entire credit goes to Smt. Gandhi because of this achievement. The other memorable incident in her regime was the entry of Rakesh Sharma into the Space.

In the field of agriculture "Green Revolution" was started during her regime. In order to overcome the shortage of the food items like wheat, rice and cotton, she took various measures to increase their production. This effort Mrs. Gandhi has shown towards the improvement of agricultural conditions was known as 'Green Revolution'. Consequently instead of importing food items from other countries India has become



an exporter of these items. At the same time the “White Revolution” was an expansion in milk production which helped to combat malnutrition, especially amidst young children.

The dark period in the political career of Smt. Gandhi was started from 12th June, 1975 as her opponent from Rai Bareilly Constituency filed a petition against her regarding the mal practices in elections. Mal practices like dishonest election practices, excessive election expenditure and of using government machinery and officials for party purposes. The court thus ordered her to be removed from her seat in Parliament and banned from running in elections for six years. Gandhi rejected calls to resign and announced plans to appeal to the Supreme Court. Despite having been unseated from the lower house of Parliament, Lok Sabha, by order of the High Court. She said: ‘There is a lot of talk about our government not being clean, but from our experience the situation was very much worse when (opposition) parties were forming governments’. After news of the verdict spread. Indian High Commissioner BK Nehru said Gandhi’s conviction would not harm her political career. “Mrs. Gandhi has still today overwhelming support in the country”, he said, ‘I believe the Prime Minister of India will continue in office until the electorate of India decides otherwise’.

In spite of all these events also Smt. Gandhi did not come out of the power. She and her cabinet recommended President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed to declare a ‘state of emergency’, because of the disorder and lawlessness following the Allahabad High Court decision. Accordingly, Ahmed declared a State of Emergency caused by internal disorder, based on the provisions of Article 352 of the Constitution, on 26th June 1975. By imposing emergency Mrs. Gandhi has come out of the dangerous situation successfully. To withstand her position during this time she initiated ‘Twenty Points Programme’ for the welfare of the different sections of the people and gain their support.

After extending the state of emergency twice, in 1977 Indira Gandhi called for elections. Bharatiya Janata Party was formed under the leadership of Jai Prakash Narayan and campaigned against Mrs. Gandhi vigorously. Both Mrs. Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi were defeated in the election and she has come out of the power. Even failure also was taken as a challenge by Mrs. Gandhi. After a short interval, she withdrew her initial support and President Reddy dissolved Parliament in the winter of 1979. In elections held the following January, Congress was returned to power with a landslide majority.

The daring and dashing step in the political career of Mrs. Gandhi was “Blue Star” operation on Golden Temple. In June 1984, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale’s Sikh group occupied the Golden Temple. In response, on 6th June, 1984, during one of the holiest Sikh holiday, enacting Operation Blue Star, the Indian army opened fire killing thousands of innocent people along with supporters of Bhindranwale. Indira Gandhi regarded as the most controversial political leaders of the country for her unprecedented decision of imposing a state of emergency as well as carrying out the Operation Blue Star in Punjab. As a result of this on 31st October 1984, two of Gandhi’s bodyguards, Satwant Singh and Beant Singh, assassinated her with their



service weapons in the garden of the Prime Minister's residence. The dynamic, daring, dashing and charismatic leaders life has been ended with a great tragedy.

In conclusion we can say that Mrs. Gandhi is undoubtedly a successful political leader in the history of Independent India. Being the first woman Prime Minister, and an influential leader, in a prevalently male-dominated society, Indira Gandhi is a symbol of feminism in India.

Even though Mrs. Gandhi was died, but her influence is there still on the congress party and the rural poor. She is reverently remembered in many part of rural India as Indira-Amma ("Amma" means "mother" in many Indian languages). Her Garibi Hatao slogan is still used by the Congress during political campaigns. The present president of the Indian National Congress, Sonia Gandhi, who is also the daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi, is said to style herself in resemblance to her.

In memory of Mrs. Gandhi, Central government has introduced 'Indira Awaas Yojana' and continuing till date. The international airport at New Delhi is named as the Indira Gandhi International Airport in her honor. As recognition of her services, Indian government has honored with Bharat Ratna award in 1971. She was also given Lenin Peace Prize for 1983-1984.

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