

ABSTRACT

WOMEN LEGISLATORS OF WEST BENGAL: A STUDY OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP SINCE 1990s

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Although the names of women leaders are endless, but there seems to echo in the studies on women's political participation a strand of doubt about their capacity for their bounded existence compared to male leaders in politics. The dominance of the male leadership in politics, an outcome of twin prime factors out of many, i) the early entry of men in the domain of politics in the public arena and ii) the patriarchal structure of the society that is reflected in the functioning of the political parties. Doubtless, these are important factors in determining the status and role of women leaders in politics in India, but a review of the list of elected women leaders who have contested polls and have been elected reflect a sizeable number of women leaders and post 1990(due to the reservation of seats for women in the local self government and the realisation of the political parties that political importance of women leaders within the party)indicates a trend that shows two interesting facts – a) the number of women participating in the electoral fray has increased and b) the percentage of women in the higher decision making bodies (i.e. Council of Ministers) has increased both at the state West Bengal and national level. Also, post 1990 shows major changes that more and more women are contesting polls under the banner of the state and regional political parties or independently rather than the national political parties.

Therefore, 1990s is very crucial period, since then a new journey has been started in Indian politics.This study is confined to the elected women MPs and MLAs of West Bengal since 1990s.The study has investigated the socio-political fabric in the state of

West Bengal where we are currently having a woman leader heading the state government. However, that is not the rationale behind the research work. The rationale is that although a large number of studies on women's participation in politics exist, but the study has investigated answers to the question whether post 1990 there has been a shift in the perception of the society towards women leaders and how the women leaders themselves view the situation and finally to reflect on what particular feminine values have been incorporated within the whole idea of political leadership that is usually viewed as male and the women leaders emulating the masculine conception and image of leadership.

The study locates the research problem in the domain of i) find out the reasons behind the limited number of women in leadership positions in the political domain; ii) whether it is possible to frame out a model of leadership from the style of functioning of the women legislators of West Bengal.

Thus, the study intends to:

- To provide a feminist perception of representation and leadership in politics;
- To review the historical account of women's involvement in politics;
- To find out the existing differences between women and men leaders;
- To provide comprehensive assessment of the leadership styles of major women political leaders in West Bengal;
- To analyze the socio-political context of women political leaders in the state of West Bengal.

Considering the nature of the research problem we have applied broadly a qualitative research method in this study and also quantitative method to some extent. Interview method is used in this study in an extensive way. The primary data for this study

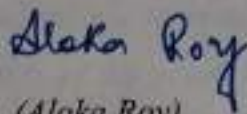
collected through the interview method covering nearly 50% women parliamentarians, legislators as well as ex-parliamentarians and ex-legislators of West Bengal. The secondary sources of data have been collected from various libraries and the political parties' offices.

The research study was conducted through an intensive case study based method and analysis of facts and political party documents the following research questions:

- i) What have been the changes forced/normal that has led to the increase in the level of participation of women in politics in India post 1990?
- ii) What has been the percentage of difference between the women primary party members and elected members to the decision-making bodies of the state as well as the women leaders who contested polls and stood elected at the state and national level?
- iii) Why according to these women leaders they find themselves different from the male leadership?
- iv) Can we say that the women legislators in West Bengal are initiating feminine or feminist style of leadership?

A wide gap is there between the percentage of primary members and elected women leaders of all parties to the West Bengal state legislature. The difference found between the percentages of women contesting elections and women who have stood elected at the state (West Bengal) and national level is found to differ. Political parties utilized the strength of women primary party members during the election but did not promote them in the important positions after winning the election. Affection, care, sensitivity, politeness, sincerity, morality, co-operation, hard work, ability to build relationship all these characteristics of women leaders make them different from male political leaders. A

care, sensitivity, politeness, sincerity, morality, co-operation, hard work, ability to build relationship all these characteristics of women leaders make them different from male political leaders. A different opinion also exists that gendered characteristics are not associated with a good leader. In West Bengal women leaders neither exhibit the principles of feminist leadership nor feminine leadership in their way of functioning rather West Bengal follows the hierarchical power structure, and women leaders coped within the dominant mainstream discourse of leadership. There are several obstacles during the electoral participation of women leaders and with their intelligence, courage, and confidence they are able to overcome such obstacles. Also, with their self-confidence, self-determination and patience they handle more complex problems peacefully. We framed an alternative style/model of leadership for women that we call '*Womanist Leadership*'. The new concept of leadership is very close to Gandhi and Bose's concept of equality of sexes and framed on mutual co-operation and consultation between men and women. We cannot deny the fact that man and women are naturally entitled with unique potentiality and qualities. But this difference if utilized well would generate a new kind of leadership and contribute immensely to the development of the country.

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