CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 OVERVIEW

A common understanding people have, when studying the relationship between gender media and politics, is that greater involvement of women in politics would lead to greater sensitisation of gender-related issues in political sphere and consequentially bring greater gender parity. Increased involvement of women in politics is expected to bring increased equality. This assumption parallels studies done in western countries on the phenomenon called 'gender-affinity effect', which claims that women voters will most likely vote for female candidates (Dolan 2008).

Similarly, we could ask are women voters drawn to gender-related issues with political considerations. While gender studies and feminist scholarships have explored several facets of the dialectical relationship between women, news media and politics, relatively less attention is paid to support for gender-related issues amongst women.

This research study seeks to examine the following questions: (a) Is there gender-issue affinity in politics? (b) What is the extent of affinity to gender-issues amongst women? (c) What factors determine women’s affinity towards gender issues? (d) What is the role played by media in driving women towards gender-issues? and (e) Whether the gender-issue affinity plays a role in involving women in politics?
1.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THIS STUDY

In India, gender studies widely concentrated on women and development with questions over social exclusion, empowerment/disenfranchisement and inequality (Ross & Byerly 2008). The dominating debates on various women’s movements have attacked media representation of women, under-representation of women in policy-making/decision, women’s role in political power and their considerable invisibility in media. Mostly, they have highlighted how women are being portrayed as upholders of the patriarchal value systems or mere as sexual objects (Kramarae & Spender 2000).

Historically and contemporarily, the dominant narratives represented women as passive objects from ‘male gaze’ (Ong & Peletz 1995). The dominant research model within gender and women’s studies and the larger body of works on feminist methods can be called the representational theory.

The representational theory of gender is limited in terms of the insights it can provide on how audience understand and use these ‘gendered’ messages and with what consequences. This study, however, tries to provide a corrective on the dominant tradition, representing women and media within the context of political communication. It departs from the traditional representational theory in that it reflects on the continuing relevance of concerns of media influence on audience against the core concerns of how media influences the perception of women’s issues in conventional politics.

It tries to extend traditional theories of political communication in order to support the factors determining political involvement of women. The primary argument of this study is that too much of importance is given to coverage of women in media instead of considering them as target audience
or distinctive news-user groups, given the distinct patterns of news media use, processes and effects.

In terms of media and gender, there exists a well-established and extensive tradition of theory and research. Within the communication scholarship, several mainstream researches and various other studies have widely concentrated on several issues such as stereotyping, questions of identity, gender roles & race relations, discourses in power. Greater focus was given to representation of women in media in terms of images and portrayals. Scholars have analysed gender issues as represented in print as well as visual media.

With regard to the age categories in communication scholarship in literature, much attention is paid to adult women when compared to pre-adolescent-stage girls and girl children. In terms of methodology, emphasis was given to qualitative research focusing on rhetoric analysis and language discourse. Many studies have praised gender within the context of culture, examining cultural politics.

This study expands our understanding of factors that affect women's involvement in gendered politics to examine the extent and determinants of gender-issue affinity amongst women. The conceptual framework extends (Dolan 2008) study on gender affinity effect which found evidence for the claim that women tend to vote for female candidates during elections.

By a similar reasoning, this study suggests that women tend to develop an affinity towards gender-related issues as a part of their political socialisation. This study constructs a gender-issue affinity scale to measure the levels of commitment of women to gender-related issues. It models gender-issue affinity as dependent variable and explores the role of news
media in conventional and non-conventional forms of political involvement of women.

1.3 RESEARCH CONTEXT

Since Independence, women in India have come a long and hard way in Indian politics. The cause of women’s empowerment has taken giant strides in education, employment, economic freedom, political awareness, participation in the political process and assertiveness. However, comparatively, there are, to say it in Frostian style, miles to go and promises to keep. By and large, women, despite their progressive journey in all spheres since Independence, are still remaining underrepresented in the Indian political system.

In the 9-phase Parliamentary elections held in April and May 2014, women’s representation in the Lower House has, of course, gone up. Compared to India’s first general elections held in 1952, the numbers show a magical rise. However, juxtaposed with the male number, the women’s number shows a lack of proportion to the population of female voters.

The involvement of women in mainstream politics in India reveals that there has been a significant rise in election campaigning and voter turnout. Despite marked increase in these two aspects, women continue to be under-represented in legislative bodies and political parties at national as well as state level (Rai 2011).

While India boasts of several women leaders such as Indira Gandhi, former Indian Prime Minister; Sonia Gandhi, Chairperson of the Congress party as well the United Progressive Alliance; women leaders of political parties and women Members of Parliament/Members of Legislative Assemblies, one cannot turn a blind eye to the stack reality that the number is still not up to the mark. With the women’s reservation bill, which aims at
reserving 33 per cent of seats in law-making bodies for women still pending, women’s struggle for gender parity is far from being over.

Even though women are the leaders/heads of a considerable number of political parties in the national as well as state levels, the representation of women within the rank and file of well-known political parties is not in considerable portion (Rai 2011).

1.3.1 Women in Ancient Times

Woman, who was glorified in Hindu mythologies and Vedas as supreme power, as an equal partner of man, as a learned and knowledgeable force, as a metaphor for perennial power and natural phenomenon, has been given a raw deal in the Indian society for centuries and is at the receiving end of all brutalities and atrocities. ‘Sati’, dowry deaths, rapes….endless are the crimes against women happening on day-to-day basis. Much water has flowed under the bridge since the Vedic age, when women had been said to command respect by virtue of their knowledge, poetic power and administrative acumen. There is no dearth of records to show that woman once was at the peak of blazing glory and bright fame.

There are sufficient evidences to show that women were eligible for studying the Vedic literature and performing the sacrifices, till about 200 B.C. Several hymns (20) of the Rig Veda are composed by rishnis or poetesses. Man can perform the Vedic sacrifices only with the presence of his wife (Altekar 1965). Indian philosophic psyche is quite engraved with portraits of God as a woman too, who is a force behind creation, preservation and destruction of the Sakthi or Kali ilk. All these elaborate descriptions of respect for ancient Indian woman, in fact, might evoke a sense of nostalgia among feminists and women liberators.
Here is a civilisation, which considers men and women to be at the same level, gives equal importance to them in family and society. In Vedic age, India respected women amounting to worship; a fact which Europeans seem little to suspect in their country though they accuse the extreme East for denying women the dignity and consider her only as instrument of pleasure. (Jaccoliot 1870) So, it is reiterated that women, who enjoyed immense power and commanded respect in ancient Indian civilization, have lost them over the ages.

1.3.2 Women's Voting Rights

With the patriarchal society emerging in the Middle Ages and the subsequent centuries up to the 19th century, women have been relegated to the background, rather to the kitchen, and as pleasure toys of men. Consequently, they have been denied education and voting rights, let alone political power.

After print media started emerging, an awareness of women’s rights in all spheres of society began setting in. A Vindication of the Rights of the Women by Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792 is a milestone in the history of voting rights for women. The voices for suffrage for women were raised first in the western world. Women in New Zealand were granted voting right in 1893. Australian women got it in 1902 and only later, Britain, Canada and America followed the course after the First World War.

1.3.3 Women in Politics

Right from the first part of the 20th century to this day, women’s involvement in politics has been rising, of course. But, with the norms and laws reflecting the values and more the male-dominated world, it is not surprising that the women’s political representational rate has not been much
in proportion to their share of the total population. There have been, though, amazing instances of women leaders making it big in the arena of politics.

There are 20 most powerful women, who rule the roost in politics, according to a list released by Forbes (2014): Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany; Hillary Clinton, U.S.; Dilma Rousseff, Brazil; Sonia Gandhi, India; Michelle Obama, U.S.; Kathleen Sebelius, U.S.; Janet Napolitano, U.S.; Cristina Fernandez, Argentina; Margaret Hamburg, U.S.; Michele Bachmann, U.S.; Julia Gillard, Australia; Mary Schapiro, U.S.; Aung San Suu kyi, Burma; Queen Elizabeth II, U.K.; Nancy Pelosi, U.S.; Queen Rania Al Abdullah, Jordan; Yingluck Shinawatra, Thailand; Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Liberia; Laura Chinchilla, Costa Rica; and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Nigeria.

Forbes, which held a women’s summit on May 14-15, 2014, has unfortunately left out several powerful women, who have been making waves in politics in many Third World countries. Particularly, in India, there are a few dominant women leaders, who have been fighting against heavy odds. But the overall rate of women’s involvement in Indian politics has been abysmal. Even among the political woman celebrities, one can see that most of them have had an underpinning of male support.

1.3.4 Women in Media

There is no denying that media have played a vital role in bettering the condition of women, bringing to light the exploitation and suppression of women on all counts including education, employment, gender equality. Media have, from the days of the freedom struggle, contributed their mite to the women’s ascending positions in politics.

However, it cannot also be denied that media, both mass media and new media have an inbuilt tendency to portray women in an intoxicating light
for meeting commercial ends. Cinema and internet, for instance, have their own share of delineating women in obscene terms and thereby, earning success at the box office.

Predominantly, the media scene in India is that it does not address serious issues about unequal treatment and exploitation of women in various fields, but it focuses on reporting sex-related incidents against women by sensationalising the news of atrocities against them (Justice Ray 2008).

Positive as well as negative news items about women are getting prominence in media, particularly print media. While the news of two Dalit sisters in Uttar Pradesh getting raped and murdered has been covered by almost all dailies in all languages all over India, the news of an Andhra teen girl being the youngest Everest climber has not received as much public attention as it deserves, arguably more so.

Print media should be lauded for their major contribution to the continuing process of bringing to light issues and crimes involving women and their achievements even at the grassroots-level, though they exhibit a streak of sensationalism while writing about controversies involving woman political leaders. On the one hand, they never fail to publish rape, murder and suicide of women, who are driven up the wall and on the other hand, they highlight extraordinary grit and determination that women exhibit in certain instances. Media coverage has helped several politically ambitious women to hog the limelight and further their careers. But, sometimes, the media seem to be whipping up the controversy with an eye on sensationalism.

1.3.5 Crimes Against Women

Several laws are in force in India to ensure and protect the modesty and welfare of women. On education and employment fronts, women are
generally supposed to have traversed long terrains, still crimes against women are going up to such an extent that educated and employed women find it unsafe to travel alone.

In a country which had a woman as President, a woman Speaker, a few woman Chief Ministers of states of the union and women in top positions in government and private sectors, women in the lower-rung are the easy targets of violence and sexploitation by men.

Despite the fact that information technology education and employment have come within the reach of women, the environment continues to be far from safe for women. While digital technology, that has spawned the internet, cell phone, Facebook, Twitter etc., was expected to open up portals of total freedom for women, there is no dearth of news in India day in, day out about girls missing, raped, murdered, all on the pretext of safeguarding the societal orderliness.

India is the fourth most dangerous country in the world for women (Thomson Reuters Poll 2011). India has targeted and annihilated more than 50 million women (of the total population) within the span of three generations. They are threatened by several forms of violence including acid attacks, burnings, beatings and rape (Banerji 2012).

Though the official statistics show an increasing health status, literacy rate, sex-ratio, work participation rate and women's political involvement, it shows increase in social evils such as child marriage, sexual harassment, rape, dowry deaths, domestic violence and exploitation of women workers at the work place. Rape, kidnapping, molestation, humiliation, tortures, wife-beating and dowry deaths have grown up over a period of time. Nearly 53 cities with population of more than 10 lakh are identified as mega cities as per 2011 population census. Nearly 33,789 criminal cases were
reported against women from these 53 cities in 2011 and 24,335 cases in 35 mega cities in 2010. Crime rate in these cities (21%) was relatively higher when compared to the National crime rate (18.9%) (Reference Note by Lok Sabha Secretariat 2013).

1.4 STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

There is a significant body of research in the communication discipline that examines relationship between gender, politics and media (Ong & Peletz 1995; Byerly & Ross 2006). A closer examination of studies on gender, women and politics indicates that the predominant researches have been on election campaigns, women in public sphere, public debates, and participatory democracy.

Theoretical perspectives formed by social movements, studies on gender and development indicate the widely prevalent core issues of contestations - women in decision making, representational dialectics, gender roles; ideological orientation indicate that there are many core issues that are of concern to women.

To reach a critical mass for successful mobilisation, we need people to involve in women's issues in political sphere, not just in politics. Without this political commitment, women's involvement in politics might not make much of a difference, especially, when the institutional structures and rules are still played by patriarchal values. For greater gender equity, gender issues should be considered viable for political action.

1.5 NEED FOR THE STUDY

The dominant approach to role of media in gender politics is to emphasis the questions of media representation of women over considering women as distinctive news user groups or an audience community with their distinctive pattern of media use, processes and effects. The representational
theory of gender is limited in terms of the insights it can provide on how audience understand or use these ‘gendered’ messages and with what consequences.

Women might be willing to overrule several personal, traditional considerations, work counter hegemonically to support women's issues. For instance, keeping in mind the crimes against women, a gender-issue, whether women involve in non-conventional political activities?

While clearly acknowledging that institutional and structural factors play a critical role and the complexities of gendered considerations in politics, this study underscores the continuing need to engage with media to make gender-issues salient. Making gender a media issue brings a degree of salience to women's cause.

1.6 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

A survey of 1,108 women was conducted in Chennai, India, to explore the effects of selected drivers of non-conventional political activity, from the perspective of gender-affinity. The factors included were the level of importance women attach to media, extent of women's news media use, their level of interest in political news, the degree of women's news satisfaction, the level of women's interpersonal trust and the related perceptions apart from demographics.

1.7 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Does increasing use of news media and increased interest in political news, with its embedded patriarchal value-systems enable or constrain women involvement in gender-related issues? To understand the
relationship between media and gender better, it would be worth exploring how media influences women's concern for gender-related topics and themes. The objectives of the study are:

1) To find out whether there is gender-issue affinity in politics?
2) To analyse the extent of affinity to gender-issues amongst women;
3) To identify the factors determining women’s affinity towards gender-issues;
4) To identify the role played by media in driving women towards gender-issues; and
5) To analyse whether the gender-issue affinity plays a role in involving women in politics.

1.8 CHAPTERISATION

Chapter I provides a brief introduction on the research area, focusing on the statement of the research problem, conceptual framework of the study, need for the study, scope of the study, research context and aims and objectives of the study. The chapter also offers a glimpse of women's political involvement during different periods.

Chapter II offers in-depth discussions about previous studies conducted in the research area. A review of a few selected literature, based on the political involvement of women, gender issues are covered. The objective of this chapter is to examine the key detriments of political involvement from the perspective of gender-issue affinity.

Chapter III outlines the research design, with a focus on providing a rationale for choosing the field area and the respondents. The process and
strategies for survey are discussed along with operationalisation of key variables.

Chapter IV presents the result of the survey and data analysis. Cross-tabulation, chi-square tests, t-tests, ANOVA, Friedman test, factor analysis, correlation and multiple regressions in addition to structural equation method (SEM) were used in order to provide a descriptive outline of the responses.

Chapter V presents the interpretation of the findings and the conclusion of the study. It also suggests solutions to further advance the present research area.