PREFACE

The discourse, procedure, structures and functions of traditional politics and governance continue to be heavily skewed in favour of men, resulting in the invisibility of women in the political and decision-making spheres, on the one hand, and the continued absence of their concerns and issues from policies and plans, on the other. This unequal sharing of power has placed an undue burden on women in terms of uneven distribution of resources with the consequent impact of subordinate socio-economic status, declining sex ratio, increasing crime against women and feminization of poverty.

Consequently women’s rights advocates have been pleading for space for women to bring their vision and leadership, knowledge, skills, views and aspirations on the development agenda from the grassroots to the national and international levels. Women activists have started challenging the legitimacy of existing governance structures and institutions and their functioning in ways that perpetuate gender based discrimination. It is asserted that only the entry of a critical mass of women into politics, can ensure a politics that is both ‘transformed’ and ‘transformational’. It is further emphasized that this is the route to attainment of good governance, in which politics will be based on participatory, consensus-oriented approach, wherein the government is
accountable, transparent, responsive, effective, efficient, equitable and inclusive.

Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, in 1995, equally recognized the inequality between men and women in sharing power and decision-making at all levels as a critical area of concern. It emphasized that ... “[W]omen’s equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. Women’s equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women’s interest to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women’s perspectives at all the levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved.”

Notwithstanding this recognition, Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies continue to be male bastions, where women though present, are few and far between. This leads to a few posers: why does politics continue to be an inhospitable terrain for women? What difficulties do they encounter in breaking the glass ceiling of politics? Having done so, how do they perceive themselves, and their roles and how do they perform? Above all, are they able to bring a feminist (womanist) perspective into decision-making?

In this context and backdrop, the thrust of the present study is on the Women Legislative Elite of North-West India.
The study attempts to assess the socio-economic background of the women legislators, their entry into the political and legislative field, their motivations, role perception and performance. It seeks to validate the hypothesis that “women would change the nature of political power” and clean the stream, “changing stagnant pools into fresh flowing waters”. Accordingly, it concludes with some viable suggestions for increasing women’s participation in politics and decision-making.

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