

## Politics, Caste and Gender role in Indian politics

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### Introduction

Democracy is not only about elections and a representative government. Democracy is also about equality, no matter religion, class or gender. Therefore the interviewees were asked about their everyday life to learn whether and how democracy is present, how the decisions and responsibilities are divided in their home, and how they explain women's situation in their surroundings with focus on gender equality. India is a heterogeneous country with a well-known caste system. Hinduism is the religion with the largest numbers of devotees in the country. There are also large groups of Muslims, Buddhists and Christians. Although India has been a secular state since the independence, religion is still a part of the daily life of many. Religion is also present in the political arena and the cause of deep social and political conflicts.

Gender equality is important in a democracy and women are taking on a more prominent role in the Indian society. Women are entering the public sphere, getting higher education and entering professions earlier only occupied by men. The fact that India has several women in leading positions looks fairly good in a general perspective of women's influence. There are women in top positions and women leading grassroots organisations. The economic situation in India is constantly improving and the middle class is growing. The illiteracy rate, though, is still high in India among the lower classes, and the people lacking basic education are mainly women. Undoubtedly, illiteracy and lack of education cause difficulties in obtaining information about the rights associated with a democracy.

Democracy and gender issues are two topics that have been under focus for sometime, both independently and dependently of each other. Democracy in India to be how they recognize democracy and rights associated with democracy, in their daily lives and how they reflect upon gender equality in relation to democracy. The limited nature of female participation and representation in national decisionmaking institutions has important consequences for women and for the legitimacy of the institutions. Where women constitute half the population in a political system which supports equality and where both women and men are legally eligible for political office, women's participation should be equal to that of men. If this is not the case, it signifies deep flaws within the political system. Representation is not only a means of ensuring

individual participation. It is also the responsibility of the representatives to act on behalf of the constituents, including women, who elected them and reflect their ideas and aspirations.

Women's disproportionate absence from the political process would mean that the concerns of half the population cannot be sufficiently attended to or acted upon as it denies their viewpoints sufficient opportunity to be integrated in the political system. While the Indian democratic state is committed to the protection of individual rights within the context of citizenship, a closer look at how it operates for the women reveals that these rights are not accessible in the public and private spheres in their full potential to all the women in India. There are historical, social and cultural factors that have limited women's capacity and chances to exercise their freedom to participate in the political processes. The evolution of Indian democracy through the 15 general elections so far has reflected a low representation of women in Parliament, State legislatures, in political parties and other decision-making bodies.

### **Gender and Caste in Parliament**

Caste has been an important feature of Indian public and political life. Most of the women MPs in the Tenth Parliament were members of the higher castes. For example, there were six women from the Brahmin caste. This represents a sizeable 17.14 per cent of the women MPs, while Brahmins comprise only 5.52 per cent of the population. However, it is important to guard against making an easy correlation between caste and political representation. For example, of the six women who are Brahmins, two are MPs from the Communist Party of India. In both cases the caste factor is less important than their privileged class backgrounds. Further, both were products of political movements, the nationalist struggle and the anti-emergency movement. The number of women who are able to avail of India's caste-based reservation system remains small. While 22 percent of the parliamentary seats were reserved for the Scheduled Castes, women occupied only 4.1 percent of the reserved seats. Two women MPs were from what are called the Scheduled Tribes. However, out of 39 women MPs in the Tenth Lok Sabha (representing seven per cent of the total), 14 percent were from the Scheduled Castes. Two women MPs belonged to the "backward" castes and represented open constituencies. Caste, therefore, affects the profile, loyalties and work of representatives in the Indian Parliament.

The caste system in India has existed for thousands of years and operates by dividing society into hierarchical groups by birth, with the hierarchy being defined on a purity scale. The caste functions as a closed group whose members are restricted in their choice of occupation and degree of social interaction in a manner that is reminiscent of European Guilds in the Middle Ages. These restrictions have led to large socioeconomic differentials between different caste groups. Localized affirmative action policies to improve the welfare of low-caste individuals were introduced in the 1930s in individual states such as Tamil Nadu, but nationwide introduction of affirmative action did not occur until after Indian independence in the 1940s. The Indian government initiated national affirmative action policies to improve the status and living

conditions of low-caste groups (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) by introducing caste-based quotas in political representation, public sector jobs and education. The quotas were later extended to a larger number of disadvantaged caste groups (Other Backward Castes). However, despite sixty years of affirmative action programs in India, the socioeconomic divide between high and low caste groups persists. Current debate centers on whether or not to introduce caste-based quotas in the private sector which would mandate hiring of low-caste employees.

The caste system which presumably originated in the division of labor in the ancient society has become a more or less rigid group classification, based on birth. Have you ever experienced the role of caste in your life and society? You will agree that the most detrimental and inhuman aspect of the caste system is the practice of untouchability which is continuing in spite of the constitutional ban imposed on it.

### **The Indian Political System and Women's Representation**

India is a bicameral parliamentary democracy, with a strong multi-party political system. In 1991, a woman constituted 5.2 per cent of the membership of the Lok Sabha and 9.8 per cent of the membership of the Rajya Sabha. This was lower than the preceding 1989 parliament. The election results in 1996 showed a further decline in women's representation, but in the 1999 election, 8.8 per cent of parliamentarians were women. This trend is worrying given the recent state-led initiatives to ensure women's representation in political institutions. One of the reasons for the low representation may be the strength of the party system itself, which can lead to the marginalization of issue-based politics, or to an expropriation of movements that are based on single issues. The women's movement in India has had to confront this issue. Indian political parties are, however, organizationally weak and dependent on local elites. This might be a second factor for the resistance to implementation of gender-sensitive political initiatives. The 39 women representatives in the 1991–1996 Indian Parliament were mostly middle-class, professional women, with little or no links to the women's movement. A significant number of them accessed politics through their families, some through student and civil rights movements and some as a result of state initiatives aimed at increasing representation from the lower castes.

The 2014 Indian General Elections for the 16th Lok Sabha will conclude on May 12, 2014. Given that our new Parliament will be entrusted with raising women's concerns and safeguarding their interests, it is important at this time to analyze the status of Indian women in political participation and representation. Will our new Parliament have better representation of women than the previous one? Do the Indian Parliament and Panchayati Raj Institutions have an adequate number of women members? How many Indian women vote and how many contest for elections? This brief is based on the Delhi Policy Group's Gender Scorecard and looks at some of these questions based on data collected for the Scorecard.

The 16th Lok Sabha will have a record number of 61 women leaders as compared to 59 women MPs elected during the previous General Elections. However, the figure is a far cry from the 33 percent mark that Women's Reservation Bill seeks to implement. The Bill is pending in Lok Sabha after being passed in the Upper House of Parliament. The number was lowest at 19 in 1977 elections. Women leaders account for just 11 percent of the 543 parliamentarians, while 89 per cent of seats are being represented by men.

"Of the 543 MPs elected, 61 are women. This is the highest number of women MPs elected to the Lok Sabha in the history of the country, although by a small margin," according to a report by PRS Legislative Research. Apart from Sonia Gandhi, Hema Malini and Maneka Gandhi, other prominent women elected to the 16th Lok Sabha include Kirron Kher, Poonam Mahajan, Sushma Swaraj, Uma Bharti, Dimple Yadav, Moon Moonsen and Meenakshi Lekhi.

### **The Women and Indian constitution**

Women in India constitute nearly half the population of the country, but they are poorly represented in the various governance and decision making bodies. The position depicted through the 14 general elections so far reflects a low representation of women in Parliament, State legislatures, in political parties and other decision-making bodies. Less than 8% of Parliamentary seats, less than 6% Cabinet positions, less than 4% of seats in High Courts and the Supreme Court, have been occupied by women. Less than 3% of the administrators and managers are women. The average percentage of women's representation in the Parliament, Assemblies and Council of Ministers taken together has been around 10%. (UNIFEM: 2000).

The Indian Constitution guarantees to all women the fundamental right to equality (Article 14) and equal voting rights and political participation to both men and women. As reflected in the Preamble, the Indian Constitution is firmly grounded in the principles of liberty, fraternity, equality and justice and contains a number of provisions for the empowerment of women. Women's right to equality and non-discrimination are defined as justiciable fundamental rights (Article 15) and there is enough room for affirmative action programmes for women. Equality of opportunity in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State is a fundamental right (Article 16). The Directive Principles of State Policy stress on the right to an adequate means of livelihood for both men and women equally (Article 39a), equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39d), provision for just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief (Article 39e). Directives for promoting harmony and renouncing practices derogatory to the dignity of women are also provided for in the Indian Constitution. The political rights of women are recognized without any discrimination, or distinction and they have the right to participate in decision making at all levels equally with men.

In the 1996 elections, Uttar Pradesh had the largest number of women candidates contesting the elections: 55 for 85 seats. In Rajasthan 17 women contested in 25 constituencies. Orissa had 10 for 21 constituencies and in West Bengal, 21 women contested in 42 constituencies. However

Kerala with better social indicators including female literacy had only 4 women contesting. A total of 599 women contested the elections. With all this women constituted only 3.4% of the total number of contestants. In 1998 there were only 274 women candidates out of a total of 4750 candidates contesting the elections. In 1999, out of 284 women who contested, 49 won, the success rate being 17.3% and for men it was 11.3%. Women therefore had a better percentage of winning. In the General Elections of 2004, out of 355 women who contested from the main Political Parties, 44 won, the success rate being 12.4% whereas men's success rate was 9.8%. It is interesting to note that though the number of women representatives in Parliament has not been very impressive their success rate in terms of percentage of contestants getting elected had always been higher than that of the male contestants.

### Conclusion

Women's representation in the parliament, while important on the grounds of social justice and legitimacy of the political system, does not easily translate into improved representation of women's various interests. While we cannot assume that more women in public offices would mean a better deal for women in general, there are important reasons for demanding greater representation of women in political life. Democracy is not only a classification of government or regulating the voting system. Democracy includes rights that ought to be claimed in the everyday lives of the citizens. The function and visibility of democracy in a country can therefore be understood by letting the people speak about their lives and ambitions. Many things are similar, for example in the way we talk about democratic rights. Women have been successful in subverting the boundaries of gender and in operating in a very aggressive male-dominated sphere. The problem here is, of course, precisely that these women are elite. The class from which most of these women come is perhaps the most important factor in their successful inclusion into the political system.

First is the intuitive one: the greater the number of women in public office, articulating interests and seen to be wielding power, the more the gender hierarchy in public life could become disrupted. The fact that these women are largely elite women might mean that the impact that they have on public consciousness might be disproportionately large in relation to their numbers. Second and more important, we could explore the strategies that women employ to access the public sphere in the context of a patriarchal socio-political system. Women representatives have thus benefited from this success of the women's movement. However, there has been limited interaction between women representatives and the women's movement – one of the important areas of weakness behind both the effectiveness of women MPs as well as that of the women's movement. The issue of women's movement needs to address as part of its expanding agenda in the 21st century.

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