

Class, Caste and Gender – Women in Parliament in India

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Recent reports in India indicating that many women politicians are finding it difficult to participate in politics, let alone equalize the gender gap that exists, point to an increasing need to analyze the role that women play in Indian politics. This has been supported by recent elections.

A February 1998 *Times of India* report corroborates much of what has been discussed in this handbook: namely that “domestic responsibilities, lack of financial clout, rising criminalization of politics and the threat of character assassination” are making it increasingly difficult for women to be part of the political framework. Moreover, women politicians point out that even within the political parties, women are rarely found in leadership positions. In fact, “women candidates are usually fielded from 'losing' constituencies where the party does not want to 'waste' a male candidate”.

In this section we examine the results of a study of women parliamentarians in India during the Tenth Parliament (1991–1996). The discussion focuses on three main areas: the social profile of women parliamentarians; the routes they have taken to get to their political position; and the public policy areas in which they were involved.

The Indian Political System

Party System and Women's Representation

India is a bicameral parliamentary democracy, with a strong multi-party political system. The lower house is called the Lok Sabha (Peoples' Assembly) and has 545 members. The upper house is called the Rajya Sabha (State Assembly) with 250 members. In 1991, women constituted 5.2 per cent of the membership of the Lok Sabha and 9.8 per cent of the membership of the Rajya Sabha.¹ 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.² Indian political parties are, however, organizationally weak and dependent on local elites.³ This might be a second factor for the resistance to implementation of gender-sensitive political initiatives.

Women's Movement and the Issue of Representation

The demand for greater representation of women in political institutions in India was not taken up in a systematic way until the setting up of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) which published its report in 1976. Before this the focus of the growing women's movement had been on improving women's socio-economic position.⁴ The CSWI report suggested that women's representation in political institutions, especially at the grass-roots level, needed to be increased through a policy of reservation of seats for women.⁵ In 1988, the National Perspective Plan for Women suggested that a 30 per cent quota for women be introduced at all levels of elective bodies. Women's groups insisted that reservation be restricted to the panchayat (village council) level to encourage grass-roots participation in politics. The consensus around this demand resulted in the adoption of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution in 1993.

In 1995, the question of quotas was raised again, but this time the focus was women in parliament. Initially, most political parties agreed to this proposition. But soon doubts surfaced. When the bill addressing this issue was introduced in the Eleventh Parliament in 1997, several parties and groups raised objections. The objections focused around two main issues: first, the issue of overlapping quotas for women in general and those for women of the lower castes; second, the issue of elitism. Most women's groups felt that the caste issue was a divisive one for women. Also, many felt uneasy about giving special privileges to elite women by ensuring seats for them in the parliament, while they had previously supported quotas for women at the grass-roots level of the panchayats. To date, the amendment has not been passed by parliament. However, the current government of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has committed itself to introducing another quota bill for women in parliament.

Profile of Women in the Indian Parliament

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 majority of women in the Indian Parliament are elite women. While their public role challenges some stereotypes, their class position often allows them a far greater range of options than are available to poorer women.

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 per cent of the parliamentary seats were reserved for the Scheduled Castes, women occupied only 4.1 per cent 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 per cent 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.

Class, Social Position and Gender in Public Life

Out of the 39 women MPs in the 1991–1996 Lok Sabha, 32 had postgraduate qualifications; in the Rajya Sabha 14 out of the 17 women were graduates. The class position of these women is obviously more important to their educational levels than caste. Only one out of the seven lower caste women MPs was not a graduate and the one Scheduled Caste woman MP in the Rajya Sabha had postgraduate education. The levels of education are also reflected in the professional profiles of these women. Thirty per cent of women MPs in the Rajya Sabha for example were lawyers and 25 per cent in the Lok Sabha were either teachers or lecturers.

The class from which most of the women MPs come is perhaps the most important factor in their successful inclusion into the political system.

Most of the women MPs (about 65 per cent) were between their late 30s and 60s and therefore did not have the responsibility of bringing up a young family. Given the almost universal marriage pattern that exists in India, the figure for unmarried MPs is extraordinarily high and indicates the social pressures on women who join public life. For those who are married, the pressures of public life are eased a bit by their class situation. Most MPs are able to afford paid help in the home. In many cases the joint family system, or at least strong family support, also helps. However, the constraints of family life continue to be real concerns even for privileged women.

Women have different strategies to cope with these constraints. If the family has accepted a woman's career in politics, she can negotiate with her family. This is more likely if the family is an elite political family with more than one member participating in politics. If the woman was already active in political life before she married, she can face tremendous pressures from her husband's family to conform to a traditional role that allows little scope for pursuing an active political career. A woman politician's options in this case are either to conform to the expectations of the family and retreat from public life, or to leave the family in pursuit of an uncertain future in party politics. In the latter case, the lack of family support and the stigma of divorce are a clear disadvantage for a woman in politics.

Class also mediates the influence of religion. With only one woman Muslim MP in the Rajya Sabha and one in the Lok Sabha, Muslim women are significantly under-represented. Dr. Najma Heptullah, who was also the Deputy Speaker of the Rajya Sabha, is from an elite class and educational background and enjoys support for her work from both her natal and marital family. Margaret Alva, a Christian, a former Minister of State and Founder Chair of the National Commission for Women of India, is from a similar background. In both cases the families were involved in the national movement, were influenced by liberal ideology and were highly educated.

Thus, the majority of women in the Indian Parliament are elite women. While their public role challenges some stereotypes, their class position often allows them far greater range of options than are available to poorer women.

Accessing the System

Surprisingly, active participation in the women's movement has not been one of the entry routes into formal party politics for women MPs.

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Kinship or More?

“Male equivalence” has been a dominant explanation for how women access political life. The assumption here is that women access political life with the support, backing and contacts of the family, in particular that of the husband. In the sample of 15 women surveyed, 1/3 of the women MPs, for example, have “family support” in the background. However, in a well-argued critique of this theory, Carol Wolkowitz points out that “male equivalence” is an inadequate conceptual framework.⁶ First, because it is the public sphere (e.g. state institutions, press and political discourse) that has to be negotiated if the family decision to put forward a woman in politics is to succeed, it is not a private, but a public matter. Second, in many cases the husbands do not support the candidature of the wife at all. It is the pressure of party political bosses that forces the issue in many cases. The centralized system of distribution of seats in mass political parties helps in this context. A party's concern with levels of representation of certain groups within its ranks and consequences for legitimacy of the party among the under-represented groups might be the motive for including women.

Social and Political Movements

Together with “kinship link” and state initiatives, an important factor impacting on women's access to political life seems to be social and political movements. These movements have created windows of opportunity and some women have been able to take advantage of these opportunities to access political life.

For example, the national movement was an important mobilizer of women. Gandhi's contribution to bringing women into politics is well-documented; the left movement also mobilized women.⁷ Women's organizations were constituted under the umbrella and control of the party – the Mahila Congress and the All India Women's Federation (CPI). However, none of the women interviewed in this survey had strong links with the women's wing of their party prior to their entry into parliamentary politics.

The civil rights and anti-emergency movement led by Jaiprakash Narayan (JP) in 1975–1977 was an important political movement that brought students to the forefront of national politics. Many women, both on the right and on the left wing, joined this movement and continued on in politics. Finally, in the context of current politics in India, fundamentalist and communal parties are mobilizing women.⁸ One of the most charismatic woman MPs is Uma Bharti, the product of the rise of Hindu militancy in Indian politics. She is the member of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a

mobilizational wing of the BJP and a “preacher” of Hindu texts by profession. She was at the forefront of the movement that brought down the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya.⁹

Political Leadership and Quotas

Quotas for women as a strategy for accessing the political arena has growing support among women MPs, despite the fact that very few have accessed the system through this route; most women are still firm believers in the meritocratic argument.

The influence of individual national leaders is also an important factor that militates against the “male equivalence” theory. While Indira Gandhi, for example, did little to promote women's representation in politics, Rajiv Gandhi accepted the principle of reservation of seats for women. He initiated measures that had a direct impact on the inclusion of women in politics, e.g., the 1993 provision for reservation of 33 per cent of elected seats on village panchayats for women. As we have mentioned, the ability to take advantage of such reservations is mediated by class, ethnicity and caste. However, the support of the state and state/political leaders can be important to women who want to access the political system. Quotas for women as a strategy for accessing the political arena has growing support among women MPs, despite the fact that very few have accessed the system through that route and are firm believers in the meritocratic argument. Most women MPs have supported the 81st Amendment, which would ensure a 33 per cent quota for women in parliament, even though party discipline has not allowed them to vote for this. This issue highlights the constraints that the party system poses for women politicians.

Gender and Public Power: What do Women MPs do?

Out of the 20 Congress women MPs in the 1991–1996 Lok Sabha, none was a Cabinet Minister; two were Ministers of State; and two were Deputy Ministers of State.¹⁰ In the Rajya Sabha, out of seven Congress women MPs, one is a Minister of State. The portfolios of these ministers included, human resource development, civil aviation and tourism, health and family welfare and personnel and public grievances. All these are generally regarded as “soft portfolios”; this does not, however, take away from the responsibility that these women ministers have. One Congress woman MP is the Deputy Chairperson of the Rajya Sabha. At the level of the party, one MP was on the disciplinary committee of the party and one was the President of the Mahila Congress. Among BJP women, the one Rajya Sabha member was the spokesperson on the economy and general political line of the party. Of the 10 members of the Lok Sabha, one was one of the vice-presidents of the party and two were on the National Executive Committee of their party.

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.

The system of institutional incentives and disincentives at the level of the party and parliament impact on the issues that women espouse in parliament. Most women MPs interviewed did not have women's issues high on their list of interests. Rather, they wanted to be on committees relating to economy, international relations and trade. As ambitious women these MPs want to be where power and influence converge.

The Accountability Question

One of the important issues for any discussion on gender and representation has to deal with the constituency that women represent. As there are no “women's only” constituencies, women MPs are not accountable to women as women. And yet, when issues regarding women are raised in the parliament, these women are expected to and do participate in the debates. Issues such as the welfare of women and violence against women are particularly important in uniting women MPs. These issues are discussed in the “ladies room” in the parliament. However, as all the MPs questioned made clear, they are “party women first”; the party whip is rarely flouted.

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Some women MPs are also asked by the party leadership to get involved in the women's wing of the party. While the women MPs do not necessarily see this role as an enhancement of their status within the party, some have made a success of this role and as a result gained influence with the leadership of the party.

As "party women" with political ambitions, women MPs respond to the institutional incentives and disincentives that are placed on them. All these factors limit the potential of these women MPs for representing the interests of Indian women across a range of issues. As a result there seems to be little regular contact between women's groups and women MPs. The exception here is of course the women's wing of political parties that do liaise with women MPs. This does allow the possibility of women MPs becoming conduits between the party's leadership and its women members. They are also consulted from time to time by the party leadership on issues regarding the family and women's rights. But non-party women's groups do not seem to approach women MPs.¹¹

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. 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. Without sufficiently visible, if not proportionate, presence in the political system – "threshold representation"¹² – a group's ability to influence either policy-making, or indeed the political culture framing the representative system, is limited. This fact is confirmed by the various other contributions in this volume. Further, 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. These women have been successful in subverting the boundaries of gender and in operating in a very aggressive male-dominated sphere. Could other women learn from this example? The problem here is, of course, precisely that these women are an elite. The class from which most of these women come is perhaps the most important factor in their successful inclusion into the political system. We can, however, examine whether socio-political movements provide opportunities for women to use certain strategies that might be able to subvert the gender hierarchy in politics. Finally, we can explore the dynamics between institutional and grass-roots politics. As this study demonstrates, the "politicization of gender" in the Indian political system is due largely to the success of the women's movement.

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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. This is, perhaps, the issue that the women's movement needs to address as part of its expanding agenda in the 21st century.

Endnotes

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 9. The dispute over the Babri Mosque arose out of the insistence of the right-wing Hindu fundamentalist party BJP that the Mosque was built by Muslim conquerors by destroying a Hindu temple which marked the birthplace of Lord Ram, the Hindu deity. Successive Congress governments tried to deal with this issue by avoiding taking a decision, so as not to alienate either Muslims or Hindu voters. This led eventually to a march of Hindu fundamentalists in 1991 to the Mosque, which was destroyed while the state police stood by.
 10. In 2001, there were three women cabinet ministers and five women ministers of state. See www.indianembassy.org/special/cabinet/cabinet.htm.
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