

## **Women, Politics and Power**

For years now there has been a raging and inconclusive debate on enhancing women's representation in legislatures. While most segments of political and public opinion pay lip sympathy to the cause of women's representation, women seem to be increasingly marginalized in our public life. While more and more women are now in professions, management and business, fewer women are able to make an impact on politics. The likes of Durgabai, Sarojini Naidu and Vijayalaxmi Pandit no longer have space in democratic politics. This is a question which needs to be examined with sensitivity and candour, and honest answers should be found to the vexing problem of how to enhance women's representation. But mere increase in the numbers of women in legislative office does not in itself bring about any tangible results if we play politics as usual. We need to examine the normative function of politics and juxtapose it in relation to the real nature of our political process. And we need to understand the meaning and nature of power as sought and exercised in our polity and examine the role of women in transforming not only the process of power, but also its meaning, contours and exercise.

First, let us examine the role of women in politics in India and elsewhere. A group of us comprising of Dhirubhai Seth, Yogendra Yadav, Madhu Kishwar and I in the name of "Forum for Democratic Reforms" have attempted to analyze the problem in 1999. As we stated in our document "Enhancing Women's Representation in Legislatures":

"Most countries in the world have failed to give due space and representation to women in their political life. Women are moving in the direction of near equal participation in only a handful of countries, such as Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. In these societies women have begun to seriously alter the very nature of politics, making enduring, and substantial gains in every field. However, in all other countries, including the supposedly advanced democracies of western Europe and North America, where women exercise certain freedoms and have acquired the wherewithal for economic independence, female presence in legislatures remains small and relatively insignificant.

"In India the problem for women is more serious for several reasons:

- While in many other countries women are inching forward, in India the participation of women in politics has actually declined since the days of freedom movement, both in quantity and quality.
- Government and politics are more important factors in the economic, social, and power structures in India than in most other countries with stronger civil societies, and so, the effect of women's marginalisation in politics is even more detrimental here
- The increasing violence, sexual harassment and victimization of women at the ground level in many of our political parties has made their participation extremely hazardous now.

"There were many more outstanding women leaders and workers in the Congress Party at all levels during the freedom movement than there are at present in all parties put together. In states like Maharashtra and Gujarat, virtually every neighbourhood and most villages could boast of at least one effective woman leader, even into the 1950s. But as politics became more centralised as well as criminalised, thus undermining all other institutions of civil society, women were

pushed out of leadership positions to function on the margins, at best relegated to the domain of social work at the local level. Even that tradition eroded from the 1970s onward.”

The facts speak for themselves. The representation of women in Lok Sabha has been stagnant at about 8% for about 20 years. In state legislatures, the share of women stands at 4.1% on an average. As our paper pointed out:

“One of the most puzzling features of this depressed level of women's political representation in our legislative bodies is that it seems to have no direct correlation with literacy and other apparently related indicators. A comparison between the states of Kerala and Rajasthan, whose literacy rates are at opposite ends of the spectrum, demonstrates this clearly. In Kerala it rose from less than one percent in 1967 to six percent in 1991. However, in Rajasthan, the representation of women was four percent in 1967 and reached eight percent in 1985-90, slightly more than in Kerala, but not significantly greater. Similarly, the State of Manipur, with its tradition of women playing the dominant role in both the family and the community (again due to a matrilineal heritage), has elected its first legislator only as late as 1990. Nagaland and other North-eastern states which have less repressive cultures for women have similarly low levels of women's representation. By contrast, take the proportion of women in politics in UP, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh. Though these states are known for their low education levels and repressive cultural norms for women, they have not only sent a relatively larger proportion of women to the Lok Sabha than those from the North-East, but have also elected relatively more women MLAs.

In independent India, pervasive gender discrimination has resulted in sidelining even veteran women politicians. It is difficult for women to establish a foothold without patronage from powerful men in the party - that too through close personal relations, as wives, daughters and sisters. This is indeed a matter for serious concern because the level of political participation among women in any society acts as a reliable barometer of the health of its democracy.

It is significant that stagnation and/or decline in the rate of women's political participation runs contrary to trends in many other fields. Women in India have made major inroads in various male-dominated professions, including the governmental bureaucracy. In the fields of business, medicine, engineering, law, art, and culture, women who were given opportunities to acquire the necessary skills and education have proven themselves capable of holding their own, without availing of any special measures to facilitate their entry. But they have failed to gain ground in the field of politics. Moreover, the agenda of women's empowerment seems to have lost the kind of moral and political legitimacy it enjoyed during the freedom movement, as was evident from the ugly scenes in the aftermath of tabling the Women's Reservation Bill in Parliament. Such a response would have been inconceivable in the India of the 1920s to the 1940s.

All these trends indicate that women's representation in politics requires special consideration, and cannot be left to the forces that presently dominate our parties and government. Today, even the best of our female parliamentarians feel sidelined and powerless within their respective parties. The few women in leadership positions have not been able to encourage the entry of greater numbers of women in electoral and party politics, and are an ineffective minority within their own respective political groupings. “

As in many other issues, political tokenism, rank hypocrisy and politics of expediency are playing a dominant role in respect of women's representation. The 85<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill is severely flawed. The Bill mechanically provides for reservation of one-third constituencies in Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas only for women candidates. Once one-third seats are reserved for women, the total reservations for elective legislative offices including for Schedule Castes (SCs) and Schedule Tribes (STs) will be nearly 50%. Obviously such large reservations cannot be sustained in the same constituencies for long. Therefore rotation of reserved constituencies will become inevitable. As women constitute nearly 50% of the population in all constituencies, such rotation cannot have any rational basis, and has to be effected by a random method like draw of lots. This will also lead to vociferous and justified demands for rotation of seats reserved for schedule castes. Such reservation of 50% seats and rotation of reservation in about 42% of seats (Women + SCs) will mean that most of the incumbents will be unseated with every rotation.

Such compulsory unseating by draw of lots has several unhappy consequences. First it violates the very basic principles of democratic representation. Second, it jeopardizes the possibility of sensible planning to contest and nurture a political constituency for all candidates - male or female. Third, with incentive for reelection disappearing, politics will become even more predatory and unaccountable. Fourth, as successful women have no realistic chance of seeking reelection from the same constituency, they will be deprived of a political base. Fifth, unseated incumbents will put up proxies as candidates and such proxies would be expected to keep the seat 'safe' for men until next election, when they can reclaim their seats. Sixth, women contesting against women will lack legitimacy of representation in a diverse democracy. These serious infirmities are known to, and understood by, the parties and male politicians. That is the reason why all major parties pay lip sympathy to women's representation, but fail to enact a legislation.

Fortunately there are effective ways of addressing the various problems posed by reservation of constituencies. Two facts are of seminal importance while designing a viable and acceptable model for enhanced women's representation. First, in our country, as in all major democracies, the role of parties in electoral politics is preeminent. Independents are rarely elected to legislative office. The few independents who are elected are often rebel candidates of a party who continue to enjoy the loyalty and support of large sections of party cadres on grounds of personal loyalty, caste or faction. Such candidates, if they win, either rejoin a major party, or are marginalized in subsequent elections. Very few have been able to sustain an independent political base for long and are capable of getting elected without a major party support. For instance, the number of independents who get elected to Lok Sabha is around 1% of the total membership and over 99 % of independents lose the deposits i.e., they do not obtain even a sixth of the valid votes polled.

Second, analysis of the past elections shows that the percentage of candidates getting elected is higher among women than among men. For instance, from 1952 to 1998, in the 12 general elections, 10.32 percent of all male candidates who contested for Lok Sabha were elected. Among female candidates contesting, this percentage was significantly higher at 17.16 %. But as we have seen earlier, the real contest in elections is among recognised parties. From 1984 to 1998 out of 8928 male candidates contesting Lok Sabha elections, 2366 (26.5%) were elected.

During the same period, out of the 541 women candidates contesting, 176 (32.53%) won the election. Clearly, in percentage terms the success rate of women is consistently higher than that of men. This may not necessarily prove that Indian voters elect women representatives in preference to men. Such a conclusion will be somewhat premature considering the relatively smaller number of women candidates and the fact that serious women candidates tend to come from prominent political families. However, it can be safely concluded that the Indian electorate does not discriminate against women candidates on grounds of gender.

Reservation of constituencies is a realistic response to an electoral system based on single member constituencies in the first-past-the-post system. In such a system, the scattered minorities which are not concentrated in pockets and do not enjoy either dominant or decisive influence cannot get fair representation. Therefore constituency reservation becomes an attractive option. But women constitute nearly 50% of votes in all constituencies. And there is no evidence of deep seated prejudice against women in public office. In such a situation, reservation of constituencies is both unhealthy and counter productive. We should look at viable alternatives to reservation of constituencies in order to enhance women's representation.

**Multi-member constituencies with one out of three seats allocated to women and proportional representation are two such models.** Both require significant restructuring of constituencies or constitutional reform. And both are mutually compatible. Eventually Indian democracy must move towards some form of proportional representation if the diverse and scattered groups are to get fair representation. But fairer representation for women need not await such fundamental changes. A relatively simple, elegant, acceptable and effective model is available.

As party candidates alone matter in most cases, and as voters do not seem to discriminate against women candidates, the answer lies in party quotas for women. Each party shall be compelled by law to nominate women candidates in a third of the constituencies. The party however can choose where it wishes to nominate women, duly taking local political and social factors into account. If any recognised party fails to nominate women in sufficient numbers, for the shortfall of every woman candidate, two male candidates of the party shall lose the party symbol and affiliation. In order to prevent a party from cheating by nominating women from constituencies or states where it is weak, the unit for consideration (in which at least one out of three candidates shall be a woman) for the Lok Sabha shall be a state or a union territory and for the State Legislative Assembly, a cluster of three contiguous Lok Sabha constituencies. All this can be enforced by a mere amendment of the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

Such a model has several advantages. Parties have the freedom of choice of candidates and nominations will not be based on draw of lots. Such a flexibility will promote natural leadership. There will be a large pool of credible women candidates in the fray, and a sizeable number of women will be elected. A woman candidate will be contesting against male and female rival candidates, and the voters' democratic choice is not restricted. Such an election will have greater legitimacy. An incumbent need not be unseated by rotation, and successful women legislators can nurse their constituencies. There will be no chance of proxy women candidates, nor will rotation of reservation be necessary. Parties will be compelled to increase the participation and

profile of women members. Parties also can choose women from various social backgrounds depending on local social and political conditions.

One of the key issues that needs to be brought to the fore is women's role in transforming the nature of politics. Collaboration, power sharing, participation, empowerment, fair allocation, creation of opportunities for all, and promotion of human dignity - these are all issues very dear to women. Women recognize the need for alternative politics by virtue of their own exclusion and victim hood in the male bastion of politics. Equally, women recognize the need for better opportunities for all children, decentralized governance and empowerment on account of their own life experiences, concerns of child-rearing and natural biological instincts. In other words, our expectation is that women will exercise power differently. In fact, our hope is that they will redefine politics. School education of reasonable quality available to all children, primary health care accessible to all people, community participation and empowerment based on the principle of subsidiarity, elimination of all forms of indignity and drudgery – these are the critical issues facing our society. In our politics, the space for such issues and the resources for these sectors are limited. But as long as these issues are not addressed, there is no realistic possibility of fulfilling the potential of our children, and preventing the avoidable suffering of our people.

The challenge today therefore is not merely how to enhance women's role in politics and ensure their legitimate share of power. Every sane democrat will support fair representation in the councils of power. But the central question is two fold: how do we define power – is it merely change of players or change in the rules of the game; and how do we reshape the Indian state to ensure fulfillment of human potential and prevention of all avoidable suffering. The conditions are ripe for a fundamental reshaping of our polity. Our people are yearning for change. A demographic transition is sweeping our country, with 71% of our people below 34 years of age. The rapid spread of communications and satellite technology has been revolutionizing our attitudes. The growing fiscal crisis makes status quo unsustainable. All these are powerful drivers of change presaging fundamental transformation. Every election is a mandate for change. Every verdict offers a promise of peaceful transformation. Women's role in politics cannot be an issue of mere numbers alone in this backdrop. We need politics viewed through women's eyes, and shaped by women's experiences. Only then can change of players be substituted by a change in the rules of the game. The time for this tectonic shift in our political landscape and exercise of power is now.

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