

Empowering Women and Reinventing Politics

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Needless to say half the world's population are women. In most western societies women play an equal and some times even a dominant role (as in Scandinavian countries) in the social, economic and political spheres. These gains came after long, hard battles and coincided with the industrialization and modernization of these economies. But the women in traditional, patriarchal societies like India continue to suffer discrimination and humiliation that the western women have largely overcome almost half a century ago.

My work gives me opportunity to meet many interesting individuals, several of them women. I am always surprised to note that many of them never realize what their true potential is and consequently have never aimed high. In our society we seem to have cast a woman as soon as she is born into a traditional role – a good daughter, supportive wife, capable mother or doting grandmother. She is 'groomed' to be an asset for others but not for herself. She is rarely encouraged to think of herself as an individual – it is as if she shouldn't have any identity!

Even in families where boys and girls are supposedly equal, there is discrimination. But rarely does the girl growing up in such families' feel she is being discriminated. She is given the same material comforts and good schooling. The difference being - early on roles have been typecast. Where the boy's abilities, latent or non-existent, are nurtured with full force and he is groomed to be a doctor, engineer, successful businessman or take on the family mantle, a totally dependant role is carved out for the girl. Where the male child realizes his 'immense' potential, the girl grows up not even realizing she has one. She rarely grows up knowing that she has it in her to become something big. A girl has to show a lot of fire, brilliance and determination to be allowed to make something of herself. Very often, even then the determined woman has to face many obstacles. Where a man is encouraged and admired, a woman is often discouraged and laughed at for wanting to try out something on her own.

Only in times of crisis is a woman forced to test her abilities – when a husband dies or the family is in great financial crisis. That is what happened to western women during the Second World War. With all able-bodied males on the battlefield, women came into their own; and those societies were transformed forever. In such circumstances a woman cannot hope for the traditional support that a man has when carving out his career. No wonder my friend says "we would be seeing a lot more successful women if only they had wives!"

Women are capable of so much if only they are given the encouragement and same opportunities as men. Low levels of literacy and lack of exposure or experience are not at all a hindrance to their contribution to society. Recently a few of our colleagues visited Dr Aroles' Comprehensive

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Rural Health Project in Jamkhed, Maharashtra. There the primary healthcare is provided by illiterate women, often from the lower rungs of the society. Dr Arole trained them systematically to provide health services including prenatal counseling, deliveries etc. When these village health workers interacted with my colleagues, some of whom happen to be physicians, they were amazed at the confidence, poise, knowledge and skills of these ordinary women. In fact one competent family practitioner lightly commented “I am beginning to question my own ability”!

There are many instances where women have made it big in a man’s world. But this required the display of a lot of ability, grit and determination. As some one said “Whatever women do, they had to do twice as well to be thought half as good. Luckily this is not difficult!” If high quality health care can be delivered with the help of “ordinary” women, just imagine what can be achieved if the potential of millions of Indian women is tapped and given an opportunity to contribute to the societal good.

However, women’s contribution to the societal good is contingent on the nature of democratic space that facilitates their active participation in councils of power. Though the representational base of our legislatures has broadened, the number of women has not registered significant increase. On the contrary, the representation of women in Lok Sabha has remained more or less stagnant at a very low 9% over the years.

This under-representation of women has prompted us to consider the possibility of a 33% reservation for women in its Parliament. Publicly, every major party or politician of our country supports the Women’s Reservation Bill. Privately, the same political interests repeatedly scuttled this initiative and really do not want it passed! At the heart of the debate is the fact that the Bill proposes ‘rotating reservation’ that was designed to avoid permanently reserving too many constituencies. But this provision creates more problems than it manages to solve.

First, when the reserved seats are rotated, incumbent MLAs/MPs get unseated in spite of their good performance and despite carefully nurturing their constituencies. If a constituency knows that it may be randomly selected as for reservation, its representatives will lose incentive to build a strong base of support. Voters will be subject to vast shifts in the legislature every term, regardless of the previous legislator’s performance. This kind of instability will undercut political accountability by reducing the incentive for legislators to respond to the demands of voters.

Second, women themselves will suffer in terms of legislative position. While more women will be in the legislature, they will constantly have to change or run from new districts, preventing their own chances of creating a strong following based on their political record. They will owe their position then, not to a loyal electorate, but to party bosses. Though they will not be legally barred from contesting in non-reserved seats, they are unlikely to be given the party ticket to do so in these areas. Effectively, women will only have chances to contest against other women. This will ghettoize women’s politics and pure tokenism will replace legitimate representation of women’s concerns. Women will become a burden on democracy rather than a means to increase competitiveness and standards of representation.

In any case, if the Bill becomes law, the male candidates replaced will be tempted to nominate their female relatives as proxy candidates to keep the seats warm for them. The women elected on their own will never be able to build a political base as they will lose the seats on rotation!

But, Indian elections have a very interesting property: women seem to have a higher chance of getting elected than men! On an average, only 10% of all male candidates were elected (in 12 general elections up to 1998), while over 17% of women were winners. Among the recognized party nominees, only 26% of men were elected as opposed to 32% of women. This is because Indian voters have never discriminated against women candidates. It is the political parties which deny women the opportunity.

That brings us to a rather simple solution – ensuring proportional representation in elections. An electoral system where party seats depend on the number of votes obtained is called a proportional representation system. Proportional Representation (PR) offers a natural and intelligent way of increasing women's representation. Since PR requires parties to have a majority vote in order to come to power, they might lose out on the significant percentage of the female vote by not nominating women. And the more women get nominated, the more likely are they to win elections. There would then be enough serious women candidates and there will be no need for rotation of reservation, as constituencies are not reserved.

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 recognized 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 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 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.

The challenge today is not merely 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 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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