

Shirin M. Rai

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This is a study of women in public life in India. It is based on interviews in early 1994 with 15 women MPs across regional, religious, and party boundaries. Three sets of questions are posed. The first focuses on the actors themselves – who gets in and why? What aspects of the intersecting social grid of class, caste and sex/gender affects the entry of women into politics? Can we suggest a hierarchy of social attributes that characterize women in public life? The second set of questions concerns access to political life. What are the channels open to women to gain access to public life in India? What strategies do women employ to enter politics, at what points do they access the system, and what avenues are blocked? I will also examine the impact of the women's movement in India on the levels of representation of women in public life. How far have women in political life benefited (without necessarily acknowledging it, or even being aware of it) from the growing confidence of the women's movement to articulate demands for change in the public sphere? Finally, I focus on their work in office. What areas do they get involved in? Are these areas they want to be involved in, and what would they prefer to do if they had their choice? What are their ambitions for their future in public life? Did they think they had changed as persons or in their political standpoint since they entered public life?

While we cannot argue that more women in public offices would mean a better deal for women in general, there are still important reasons for exploring the issue of women's public representation. First, is the intuitive one – the greater the number of women in public office, articulating interests, and seen to be wielding power, the more disrupted the gender hierarchy in public life could become. Further, that these are largely elite women might mean that the impact that they have on public consciousness might be more significant, though particular, than the numbers would suggest. (A classic such discrepancy arises when we look at the impact of intellectuals as political actors.)

Second, and more important, we could explore the strategies that women employ to gain access to 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 cohort? The problem here is, of course, precisely that these women are a minority elite. The class from which most of these successful women come is perhaps the most important factor in their inclusion in the political system. However, is this more true for a stable polity than it is for a polity that is witnessing mobilization on the basis of caste, region, religion and class? In other words, do new socio-political movements provide opportunities for women to use certain strategies that might be able to subvert the gender hierarchy in politics?

There is a third reason why it is important to examine women's representation in political institutions: we can explore the dynamic between institutional and grassroots politics. Two questions can be asked here: 1) What has been the impact of the growing strength of the women's movement in putting the question of women's representation on the political agenda of political parties? 2) Why, and in what ways, are political parties addressing the issue of women's representation in politics at this particular point in time. And, in turn, has the women's movement been expected, and able to lobby the women representatives of parliament more effectively than male representatives? I will focus therefore not simply on who the women representatives are, and their routes to their political positions, but also on the areas of public policy they interest themselves in and to what purpose.

## 2 WHO ARE THE WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT? CASTE AND CLASS

India is a bicameral parliamentary democracy. The lower house is called the *Lok Sabha* (People's Assembly) and has 545 members and the upper house *Rajya Sabha* (State Assembly) with 250 members. Representatives are chosen on the basis of first past the post by single member constituencies for the lower house, and proportional representation by state assemblies for the upper. The government

of independent India introduced universal adult franchise, and the right to stand for election in 1950. In 1984 (later figures not available), 58.6 per cent of the voter turn-out were women (DWCD, 1988: 154). In 1991 women formed 5.2 per cent of the membership of the *Lok Sabha*, and 9.8 per cent of the membership of the *Rajya Sabha* (Swarup *et al.*: 362). This was lower than the preceding parliament. Further, 'it can be safely presumed that membership of women in [political] parties does not exceed 10 to 12 per cent of their total membership' (DWCD, 1988:157). While the UN Decade for Women put the issue of women's participation in politics on the agenda of most political parties the progress in recruitment has been limited.

There are 35 women in the current *Lok Sabha* (1991-96) and 13 in the *Rajya Sabha*. They come from varied backgrounds in terms of regions they represent, the languages they speak, the class and caste groups they belong to, and their personal/political histories. All these variables affect their understanding of the political life they participate in, and their perception of the role that they are performing in public life. Women in public life are generally from elite backgrounds in terms of caste, class, and education. However, the rise of religious fundamentalism, the increasing levels of violence in public political life in general and against women in particular, and the rise of caste-related mobilization and political movements are affecting both the caste and the class profiles of women in politics.

## 2.1 Gender and caste in politics

Caste has long been an important feature of Indian public political life. Liddle and Joshi in their book *Daughters of Independence* have examined how middle class women found it easier to enter the public sphere because these groups are moving from caste to class-oriented strategies for maintaining power and status (1986: 70-73). While in general this is correct, this analysis does not take into account one peculiar feature of the Indian post-colonial state – its commitment to improving the position of the lower castes which led to the introduction of a 'reservation' (or affirmative action or a quota) system for the lowest castes, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The reservation system, introduced by an upper-caste, middle-class national leadership, was sensitive neither to class nor to gender in its presumptions about the causes of socioeconomic backwardness of the lower castes. The system was comprehensive, and applied to

every area of public life – education, employment and representation, at all levels from the lowest to the highest. Recently, caste-based political movements have grown in many regions of India, and this growing militancy has ensured the continuing relevance of caste to the Indian political system. While most of these movements have mobilized the lower and Scheduled Castes, there has also been an attempt to mobilize upper castes in response to the challenge from lower castes. Women from lower castes have been inducted into representative politics both because of this growing militancy and the attempts of political parties to mobilize women on this issue, and also because of the growing strength of the women's movement which has put the question of women's representation on the political agenda. So in some cases women from lower castes have been able to enter public life because of the reservation system which has given them access to education, employment and seats in representative assemblies, which they would have been denied otherwise.

Even so, the number of women availing of opportunities based on caste reservation remains small. While 22 per cent of the parliamentary seats are reserved for the Scheduled Castes, women occupy only 4.1 per cent of the reserved seats. Two women MPs are from what are called the Scheduled Tribes. One woman MP out of the 13 in the *Rajya Sabha* is from the Scheduled Castes. However, out of 35 women MPs in the current *Lok Sabha*, where they are about 6 per cent of the representatives, five are from the Scheduled Castes. This is a significant 14 per cent of the women members of the *Lok Sabha*. Two women MPs belong to the 'backward' castes and represent mixed, 'open' constituencies. Of these one is an activist, and a leader, of VHP (*Vishwa Hindu Parishad*), the Hindu fundamentalist organization associated with the BJP (*Bhartiya Janata Party*). The other was given the seat by the AIADMK, the ruling party in Tamil Nadu led by Ms Jayalalitha who has initiated several women-oriented welfare and education programmes in the state.

Most of the women MPs are members of the higher castes (though not necessarily the highest) castes. There are six women who are from the Brahmin caste. This is a sizeable 17.14 per cent of the women MPs, while Brahmins are only 5.52 per cent of the Hindu community. However, we have to guard against making easy correlations between caste and representation. For example, of these six, two are

MPs from the Communist Party and Communist Party (Marxist). In both cases the caste factor is less important than the class factor – they come from privileged class backgrounds. Further, they were involved in student politics, one during the national movement, and the other during the movement against the imposition of the Emergency in 1975 by Mrs Gandhi. The importance of political movements in bringing women into the political sphere cannot be underestimated, and is a theme I will come back to.

Caste remains an important factor in the distribution of seats and voting patterns, and therefore crucially affects the profile of representatives in the Indian parliament. Caste loyalties are therefore important to representatives, and might influence their work and commitment to issues that go against the grain of caste alliances of their particular region.

## **2.2 Class, social positioning and public life**

The caste/class position of the women in parliament influences their levels of education. Out of 35 women MPs in the *Lok Sabha*, 30 have postgraduate qualifications; in the *Rajya Sabha* 12 out of 13 are 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 is not a graduate, and the one Schedule Caste woman MP in the *Rajya Sabha* has postgraduate education. The levels of education are also reflected in the professional standing of these women before they joined public life. Twenty-five per cent of the women MPs in the *Lok Sabha*, and 15 per cent in the *Rajya Sabha* were teachers or lecturers. Thirty per cent of MPs in the *Rajya Sabha* are lawyers, and 5.7 per cent in the *Lok Sabha*. These are élite women in terms of class, caste and education, and their ability to articulate and represent the interests of the vast majority of women in their constituencies is thus limited, although they do share experience of the social and personal constraints on women in a patriarchal society.

Most of the MPs are within the late 30s to 60s age bracket and do not, therefore, have the responsibility of a young family. Further, 45.6 per cent of the women MPs in the *Lok Sabha* are living without a spouse – 22.8 per cent are unmarried and the same percentage are widows. Given the almost universal marriage that exists in India, the figure for unmarried MPs is extraordinarily high, and indicates the social pressures on women who join public life. 'I

did not get the time to get married' said Vyas who is now 48. For younger women too, time and position pose dilemmas: 'You join politics and somewhere along the way your private life takes a back seat.' (Savvy 1993: 31).

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 a strong family support also helps. However, the constraints of family life continue to be real concerns in the lives of even these privileged women. They have different strategies to cope with these constraints. One is negotiation, as Sushma Swaraj explained: 'We think that the woman will be successful in any profession only if she has the support of the family and her husband.' This strategy works if the family has accepted the woman's presence in the public sphere. This is more likely if the family is a 'political' family with more than one member participating in politics, and/or if the woman was already in political life before she married into a family. A woman politician's option in this case is 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 where the lack of family support would be a disadvantage. There are instances where a woman's natal family has political muscle which it is ready to employ to support the woman's political career even where her marriage has dissolved.

Class also mediates the influence of religion. A predominant number of women MPs are Hindus. Hindus form 82.6 per cent of the total population in India with Muslims constituting 11.3 per cent. With only one MP in the *Rajya Sabha* and none in the *Lok Sabha*, Muslim women are hugely under-represented. Dr. Najma Heptullah, who is also the Deputy Speaker of the *Rajya Sabha*, is from an elite class and educational background, with support for her work from both her natal and her husband's family. Margaret Alva, a Christian Minister of State of Personnel, and Founder Chair of the National Commission for Women, is from a similar background. In both cases the families were involved in the national movement, were influenced by western education, and liberal ideology.

The majority of women in parliament, then, are élite women, supported by their caste/class background which gives them opportunities for

education, and provides a family support that might not be available to most women. While their public role challenges stereotypes, it does not seem to challenge gender roles in society; most do not think that they can operate effectively without the support of their families. Family boundaries and gender roles are therefore negotiated not challenged. This has an impact not only on recruitment patterns of women in politics but also on the issues that these women representatives are willing to take up in public life.

### 3 ACCESSING THE SYSTEM

#### 3.1 Kinship or more?

'Male equivalence' has been a dominant explanatory category for examining women's access to public life (Currell 1974). The assumption here is that women access political life with the support, backing and contacts of the family, in particular the husband. In my sample of 15 a third, five women MPs, have 'family support' in the background. However, in an well-argued critique of this theory, Wolkowitz points out that 'male equivalence' is an inadequate conceptual framework on many counts (1987). First, it is the public sphere – 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 (*ibid.* 208). 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. Rita Verma for example was courted by three different political parties despite opposition from both her natal and marital family, because they wanted to cash in on the popularity of her deceased husband who died fighting bandits in Bihar. 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. Ms Topno, for example, was asked to stand on a Congress (I) ticket because Rajiv Gandhi wanted women from tribal areas represented in parliament.

#### 3.2 Social and political movements

Together with 'kinship link' and state initiatives, an important factor affecting women's access to political life seems to be social and political move-

ments. The national movement was an important mobilizer of women – Gandhi's contribution in bringing women into politics is well documented. Less so is that of the women on the left of the political spectrum – those involved in the Communist Party which mobilized students through a network of student unions. As these unions were based in the universities, the élite character of those who joined the communist/nationalist movement via this route is evident.

The politics of the national movement, and of the communist movement, was such that the separatist argument for women's mobilization was not considered appropriate by these women. At the same time the mainstream nationalist and socialist parties did provide a mechanism of mobilizing women by constituting 'women's organizations' under the umbrella and control of the party – the *Mahila Congress* (Women's Congress) and the All India Women's Federation (CPI). None of the women I interviewed had strong links with the women's wing of their party prior to their entry into parliamentary politics. Some, like Vyas, were given organizational position on the women's wing by their parties.

The civil rights and anti-Emergency movement led by Jaiprakash Narayan (JP) in 1975-77 was an important political movement which again brought students to the forefront of national politics. As a new party with a radical self-image, the Janata Party, under the leadership of Nararayan, appealed to the students as a cohort which was untainted by institutional corruption of the electoral politics. Many women, like Swaraj, joined this movement and stayed on in politics.

The women's movement gathered considerable momentum in the early 1980s (see Kumar 1989), and though I cannot go into its history here, what is important is its impact on mainstream politics, where: 'women's issues had become so widely recognized that the centre and right parties also formed women's fronts, and special attention began to be paid to women in most general movements of the eighties ...' (*ibid.*: 27). This was helped further by the increasing international awareness of the issue, especially during the UN Decade for women. This is not to suggest that the women in parliamentary politics necessarily had roots in this growing movement. In fact, none of the 15 women I interviewed did. However, as political parties became

aware of gender issues, the chances of women being given parliamentary seats to contest increased. So, for example, the BJP has started mobilizing women not only to vote for it, but to join its organization. Swaraj claimed:

We want to attract women in large numbers. Through education, but also through encouraging their increased representation. For that we have recently made a provision in our constitution. Our ward unit would not be considered valid unless two women are office bearers. This is a rider that will help women to come forward.

Second, while none of the women MPs came into politics via the women's movement, once elected they have become involved, on an *ad hoc* basis, in the various issues about women's position arising in the parliament. This is not unproblematic for women MPs. Other than Girija Vyas, who was appointed the President of the Mahila Congress by Rajiv Gandhi, and Uma Bharti (whose work I discuss below) none of the women MPs I interviewed put women's issues on top of their list of interests.

Finally, in the context of the current politics in India, social and political movements based on religion and caste are again mobilizing women (see Sarkar 1991). This is for two reasons, explained Swaraj:

In India, *dharma* (religion) is alive today because of its women. ...When BJP raised the issue of Ram Janam Bhumi at Ayodhya – though the real issue was not this but pseudo-secularism, but Ayodhya was an easy example – women thought that this party speaks in the name of our religion and culture.

While the call to preserve *dharma* appeals to the traditional Hindu sentiments of the upper-caste, middle-class women (the main constituency of the BJP), BJP has also taken up the role and position of women in the Hindu society. Swaraj pointed out: "we have stated that if there is any *dharmgranth*, any personal law, or any ritual, if they propagate or endorse discrimination between men and women, that section will not be acceptable to the BJP".

One of the most charismatic of woman MPs is Uma Bharti, a member of the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad*, a 'preacher' of Hindu texts by profession, and was in the forefront of the movement that brought down the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. 'For me, politics is

not separate from religion ... Religious people have to fight social evils, and if they have to enter politics to do so, they should.' Bharti entered politics with the patronage of Vijaya Raje Scidhia, one of the women leaders of the BJP at a time when the party was deliberately switching its political strategy to a militant mobilization of the Hindu vote bank after its flirtation with secularism in the wake of the JP movement had failed to produce results. As a preacher of Hindu texts, Bharti was articulate, independent, and an actor in the public sphere since the age of eight. She is neither married, nor comes from an upper-caste/class family, and therefore does not embody in herself the dilemmas about political participation facing women from more conventional backgrounds. And she is militant in the defence of '*hindutva*' (Hindu way of life) which became the rallying cry of the BJP in its attempt to mobilize electoral support. She can thus combine social and political radicalism without threatening the Hindu social fabric by subverting its gender hierarchy.

### 3.3 Political leadership and reservations revisited

The influence of individual national leaders on women's participation in politics also militates against the 'male equivalence' explanation. While giving lip service to women's issues, Mrs. Gandhi did little to promote women in politics. The time when women gained seats in the Congress on the basis of deliberate promotion of women was the 1972 election when Mrs. Gandhi wanted to get rid of the old politicians who did not support her bid to power. However, as the President of All India Mahila Congress, Girija Vyas, commented:

Because Mrs Gandhi was a woman she thought if she advocated the cause of women people would not like it. But Rajiv Gandhi accepted the principle of reservation for women whole heartedly. He knew that without this the representation of women in politics will decline.

As a political leader Rajiv Gandhi presented the picture of a modernizer untouched by corruption, responsive to newly emerging groups, westernized in his approach to social issues. He was able to initiate measures that had a direct impact on the inclusion of women in politics, such as the 1989 provision for reservation of 33 per cent of elected seats on village panchayats for women. The record of R. Gandhi in the Shahbano case is far less benign however (see Calman 1992: Ch. 6).

### 3.4 Quotas for women?

Reservation of seats as a strategy for accessing the political arena has growing support among women MPs, despite the fact that very few have used this route, and are firm believers in the meritocratic argument, especially at the top of the representative institutional hierarchy. The ambivalence towards the quota system is understandable:

I do not want the quota system – there will be a lot of heartburning among male colleagues, and they will not respect you, thinking you are a 'quota-candidate', and question your ability. But if you achieve your place on merit then they will accept you as one of them

said Swaraj, the spokesperson and member of the National Executive of the BJP. However, in the same interview she also clarified,

I was of the opinion that quotas do not work. But in the last one or two years when I witnessed how women have been discriminated against in getting seats, and in the field, then I felt that I should look at this problem again. That if there is no quota women will not be able to enter politics.

This was the position of most women MPs that I interviewed. These are successful women who do not wish to see their success diluted by a quota system. However, a recognition of the continuing under representation of women in public life is beginning to undermine their concerns about the quota system.

Women have accessed public life via different routes. While family background is still important, other factors such as social and political movements, and political leaders and their policy initiatives, have also provided equally important access points to political life for women.

## 4 GENDER AND PUBLIC ROLES

Out of the 20 women Congress MPs in the *Lok Sabha*, none is a cabinet minister; two are Ministers of State; and two are deputy ministers of state. In the *Rajya Sabha*, out of seven Congress women MPs, one is a minister of state. The portfolios of these ministers include, Human Resource Development, Civil Aviation and Tourism, Health and Family Welfare, and Personnel and Public Grievances. All

these are generally regarded as 'soft portfolios', though it does not take away from the responsibility these women ministers have. One Congress woman MP is the Deputy Chairperson of the *Rajya Sabha*. At the level of the party, one MP is on the disciplinary committee of the party, and one is the President of the Mahila Congress. Among BJP women, the one *Rajya Sabha* member is the spokesperson on the economy and general political line of the party. Of the ten members of the *Lok Sabha*, one is one of the vice-presidents of the party, and two are on the national executive of the party.

I have already mentioned that most women MPs that I interviewed did not have women's issues high on their list of interests. Rita Verma and V. Raje, for example, said that they did not want to be characterized as 'women's only' MPs. The reason was obvious – that is not where promotions lie. The committees to get involved in are not concerned with gender issues but with issues regarding the economy, international relations, and trade. As ambitious women these MPs want to be where power and influence converge. The system of institutional incentives and disincentives, what is considered a good or bad portfolio within the party, and within the parliamentary committee system imposes its gendered logic on the choices that women make as to which areas to get involved in. However, many women MPs felt the discriminating power of a patriarchal institution like the parliament. In its composition, functioning, and assumptions about gender roles which are translated in the behaviour of male MPs, the parliament as an institution is implicated in maintaining the *status quo* on gender relations. The women MPs experience of the working of parliament has made them increasingly sensitive to issues of gender.

One of the important issues for this discussion on women representatives has been about the constituency that they represent. As there are no 'women's only' constituencies women MPs are not accountable to women as women. And yet, when there are issues regarding women raised in the parliament, these women have to, and do participate in the debates. Issues of welfare of women, and violence against women are particularly uniting of the women MPs:

women MPs do speak out against oppression of women irrespective of whether their party is in power. In such cases we think that women have

no *dharama* and no *jaat* (caste) other than being women. But on policy matters, like the uniform civil code, it is a different story

said Swaraj. These issues are discussed in the 'Ladies Room' in the Parliament House, and cross-party support organized. However, as all the MPs I raised this question with made clear, they are as Malini Bhattachary of the CPM said, 'partywomen first.' Once the whip cracks they have to fall into line.

#### 4.1 What value women representatives?

This study of women representatives highlights a variety of cross-cutting loyalties that these MPs have – to caste, class, religions, and to gendered family roles. Together with competing social loyalties, the party-based parliamentary system also imposes constraints upon them. Together, these social and political institutions form formidable choice-barriers for women representatives. There has been an ongoing debate within the feminist movement about the co-opting power of institutions (see Brown 1992, Rai 1995 forthcoming, Ehrenreich and Piven 1982). The various positions have covered the entire spectrum from rejecting 'dealing' with state institutions entirely, to suggesting a 'in and against' the state approach, to examining the benefits of working with/through state institutions. This study indicates the limitations of working with the state strategy in the context of the constraints mentioned above. However, it also uncovers areas where institutional politics has moved the question of women's representation forward, the question of quotas for women for example.

This survey of women MPs also suggests that these women have benefited from the growing strength of the women's movement which has put the issue of women's empowerment, and mobilization in politics on the national agenda, to which various political leaders have responded in varied ways. However, none of these women have come into political life through the women's movement. Their access to women's organizations is generally limited to the women's wing of their own parties. As party women with political ambitions, women MPs respond to the institutional incentives and disincentives that are put to them. All these factors limit the potential of these women MPs 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 which do liaise with women MPs. But non-party women's groups do not seem to be approaching the women MPs that I interviewed. There is a catch 22 here – the women's movement is aware of the weak positioning of most women MPs in parliament. They are not on the most important parliamentary committees and do not hold important portfolios. This lack of contact further reinforces the gap between women representatives and women's groups who tend to lobby executive institutions of the state, raising further issues about the value of focusing on the presence of women in representative institutions.

Women's representation in the parliament, therefore, while important on grounds of social justice and legitimacy of the political system, does not easily translate into improved representation of women's various interests.

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