

Democratic Institutions, Political Representation and Women's Empowerment: The Quota Debate in India

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This article reflects upon the debate on quotas for women in representative institutions of government. It poses the question whether current debates about quotas for women are relevant to debates on women's empowerment. In doing so, it points to the bases upon which the arguments for and against quotas have been presented within the Indian political system, taking into account the historical debates on caste, the emergence of coalition politics, the strength of the women's movement, and the engagement of women's groups with the politics of difference. The central argument of the article is that unless the issues of class-based and caste-based differences are taken seriously by women's groups in India, the wider question of empowerment cannot be satisfactorily answered. The conclusion assesses whether the Indian example is of relevance to wider debates on quotas as strategies of empowerment.

This article examines whether the current debates about quotas for women in political institutions in India can form part of a wider debate on women's empowerment. It explores the reasons for this articulation of demands by women's groups in a country where quotas have had a problematic symbolic history of nearly 40 years. Is this the way to reach a feasible politics? Is there a way forward for representing 'women's interests' through political constituencies? Is this close engagement with the state appropriate at a time when the pressures of globalization through liberalization are creating immense social inequalities and tensions within the country? Surely any debate on empowerment should start with questions about better life-chances? Such questions form the bases of debate on quotas in India.

The term empowerment has largely been ignored in the mainstream of political science. For example, it does not appear at all in the *Oxford Dictionary of Politics*.¹ On the other hand, empowerment has found great

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currency within the feminist discourses. From early on debates about participatory politics at the local levels have been important within feminist politics.² While issue was taken by some over the costs of participation, the focus was on the concept of participation rather than on empowerment. Empowerment as a concept has emerged out of debates on education, especially in the work of the Brazilian exponent of consciousness-raising Paulo Friere, and increasingly within the literature on social movements. 'The notion of empowerment was intended to help participation perform one main political function – to provide development with a new source of legitimation', writes Majid Rehnema in the *The Development Dictionary*.³ It is a legitimation of oppositional discourse as well as of oppositional social movements, of programmes, of methodologies, of policies – both macro and micro. Empowerment has been re-emphasized in the feminist literature on politics as well as on development matters. Bystydzienski, for example, defines empowerment as 'a process by which oppressed persons gain some control over their lives by taking part with others in development of activities and structures that allow people increased involvement in matters which affect them directly'.⁴

Feminists have preferred using the term empowerment in preference to power for many reasons – its focus on those who are oppressed, rather than the oppressors, its emphasis on 'power to' rather than a starting assumption of 'power over', and its insistence upon power as enabling, as competence, rather than power as dominance.⁵ Starting from a grass-roots, social movements perspective, empowerment as a term has recently come to be expanded to include institutional strategies for empowerment. Thus we have growing concerns being expressed regarding the under-representation of women in political institutions. The Beijing Declaration of the United Nations, in 1996, for example links participation in institutional politics with their empowerment in the social and economic life: 'The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of women's social, economic and political status is essential for the achievement of both transparent and accountable government and administration and sustainable development in all areas of life'.⁶

Empowerment is a seductive term. It encompasses a politics oppositional to the state on the one hand, and the economic forces of neo-liberal markets on the other. The actors in this oppositional politics are 'the people' variously defined, and identified. This categorization of the people is important for suggesting an alternative model of politics – based on the concept of needs that are articulated by the people rather than the state, and processes of politics that are participatory and democratic at the local level close to home, rather than representative and bureaucratized in far away corridors of state power. Empowerment then is the knowing and the doing;

the feasibility of such politics which allows us to feel empowered whatever our contexts. This is the great seduction. What becomes obscured from view in this discourse of empowerment are wider political implications of the concept as well as the strategy of empowerment.

While there is emphasis on participatory politics within the empowerment approaches, there is little reflection upon the machinery of social and state power itself. It has been argued that empowerment

is not a process organized from the helm of government, but it does require a strong state, that is, a state in which executive power is centralized, and departments (or provinces) are not colonized, and also one in which security agencies are not a law unto themselves ... [T]his might enable people to take greater advantage of the opportunities available to them in the existing market structures, and would in any case be a necessary condition for changes in those structures to achieve their stated aims of income or asset redistribution.⁷

This points clearly to the importance of the state, its politics, ideology, and its institutions – bureaucratic as well as political (political parties, for example) – as part of the debates on empowerment. Without such a multi-layered analysis there are good grounds for arguing that a discourse of empowerment is not really a discourse of power. It addresses itself to its audiences as if they were all potential converts to ‘the cause’. Further, there is a tendency towards homogenizing the actors engaged in the struggles for empowerment. There is ‘the people’, or ‘women’ without a sufficiently differentiated profile of what these categories mean. As the Indian debate on quotas below shows, the need to focus on the politics of difference among women is important for the credibility of strategies of empowerment as well as for their long-term viability. So, the examination here does not seek to delegitimize the concept of empowerment. On the contrary, it seeks to reinstate it so as to take into account the issue of power. Empowerment of whom? By whom? Or through what? Empowerment for what?

The current debates on institutional strategies of women’s empowerment in India are examined below. With reference to recent work the writer has engaged with Indian feminists participating in this debate, as well as earlier work with women parliamentarians, she argues that social class, political ideology, and communal identities are important to our understanding of this current phase of feminist politics in India. As has been stated elsewhere, the issue of class is at the heart of the process of engendering development, and it is at our own peril that we forget it.⁸ This is not simply to forestall a backlash, but also to address issues of difference among women and to rethink women’s empowerment. The next section sets out the story of two

debates that took place in India over the last decade – one resulting very quickly in quota legislation for women, the other resulting in terrible differences among various groups which have delayed the passing of the women's quota bill at the national level. Echoing Nancy Fraser,⁹ who argues that while justice requires both recognition of difference and an insistence upon redistribution of socio-economic resources, the two have come to be seen as disassociated from one another. The argument here is that political representation would be a strategy of recognition rather than redistribution, thus limiting its transformative potential. There follows a conclusion assessing what, if anything, do the Indian debates on quotas for women teach us about the possibilities, and limitations of this strategy for the empowerment of women.

The Indian Experiments with Quotas

The Local, the National, the Political

On 22 December 1992, the Indian Parliament passed the Constitution (73rd and 74th) Amendment Acts. These amendments 'enshrined in the Constitution certain basic and essential features of Panchayati Raj Institutions [PRI] to impart certainty, continuity and strength to them'.¹⁰ These two amendments responded not only to a growing political demand for greater decentralization of power, after a crisis of governability at the centre in Indian politics in the 1990s, but also to the emerging demand of women's groups for greater visibility for women in politics. 'A unique feature of the new phase in panchayats and municipalities in India is that it has ensured one-third representation for women in the local bodies and one-third of the offices of chairpersons at all levels in rural and urban bodies for them.'¹¹ This has created the possibility for about 1,000,000 women to get elected to village panchayats and urban municipalities; so far around 716,234 women are holding elected positions in the country and in some states such as West Bengal, more than the mandatory 33.3 per cent women have been elected. What is more remarkable about this already remarkable success story is that all political parties co-operated to get this legislation passed.

The 1996 elections in India resulted in a parliament which contained fewer women members than the previous three parliaments – women contested only 11 per cent of the total seats, and the 1996 parliament has only 36 women Members of Parliament (MPs) out of a total of 545, as compared with 44 in the previous parliament. At the same time, the coalition which was eventually returned to government committed itself to introducing legislation in the first session of the new parliament, ensuring a

quota for women of 33 per cent in future Indian parliaments. Such a quota would ensure that out of 545 seats in the Lok Sabha, 182 seats will go to women. Constituencies reserved for women would not be fixed, but would be rotated at random. All parties, irrespective of their ideological standpoints, initially agreed to support this legislation. The Bill was introduced in the first term of the new Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)led government in parliament, but it has been referred to a Joint Select Committee of the Indian Parliament due to differences among parties about the detail of the proposed Bill. The debate on the Bill in the Indian press reveals that there is a lack of general political will among parties to pass the 81st Constitution Amendment Bill, which would ensure this quota for women. Women's groups have largely supported the measure, though some important voices within the women's movements have spoken out against the Bill.

One could speculate about the reasons why the various political parties, who supported the ratification of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act on 24 April 1993 which provided for a quota of 33 per cent for women in panchayats (village councils) and their leadership, have been more reluctant regarding similar legislation at the parliamentary level. Could it be that enhanced representation of women in the national parliament spells a far greater and immediate challenge to the gendered *status quo* within the party political system? The panchayats while symbolic of grass-roots democracy in India, have never been resourced well enough to be important to the political processes in Indian politics. Or is it that the pattern of quota systems in India has shown that elite-based strategies of empowerment are less helpful to groups seeking greater recognition than those based upon grass-roots institutions? The message from established political parties and state institutions is mixed. While a strengthening women's movement has been able to politicize the issue of gender representation successfully, mainstream political bodies have not embraced the gender justice agenda wholeheartedly.

At this point it is also important to consider the reasons for the near consensus that has emerged among the women's groups on the issue of quotas. While many women's groups have supported the move for quotas (a significant number of these are attached to political parties), some feminists have opposed this move as 'tokenist'. The first group of feminists focuses on the under-representation of women in party politics; the second is concerned about the elitist character of parliamentary politics and the dangers of expropriation that women face in seeking inclusion into this overwhelmingly male space.¹² Feminists who oppose the Bill do so as much on grounds of detail as principles. Kishwar, for example, also opposes the focus on reserving constituencies which will force women to contest only

against other women and will 'ghettoize' them. She wishes to see a system of 'multi-seat constituencies where one out of three candidates has to be a woman'.¹³ Concerns about co-optation, and elitism remain real for many feminist and women's groups in India: 'the link between reservations in Parliament and "empowerment" of women is at best tenuous, and may even be a way of closing off possibilities of further radicalization of Indian politics ... If we attempt to recover feminist politics as subversion, ... we would need to move away from politics as merely seeking space within already defined boundaries of power.'¹⁴

Women's Interests, Women Representatives

In a recent article Hoskyns and Rai have argued that policies based on a recognition that certain groups are under-represented can also be seen as a means of political gate-keeping, and that in certain circumstances the recognition of gender-based groups may be seen as less disruptive of the hierarchy of power relations than the recognition of groups more clearly based on class. 'Gender' can be accommodated on this reading – but only if it loses its class dimension. The argument then is that 'the privileging of gender over class, together with the grip of the political parties on access to the political system, results in a particular profile of women representatives which in turn raises issues about accountability'. A conclusion drawn from this is that 'this selective inclusion of women in the political process is important – but inadequate in challenging the established hierarchies of power relations'.¹⁵ If development agendas are to be re-articulated, if transformation of the lives of women has to take place in tandem with that of the gender relations within which they are enmeshed, then the issues surrounding economic and social class relations have to be addressed.

For the moment, the main thrust of academic research and institutional initiatives continues to focus on other categories of difference than class. The salience of class in political life remains weak and representation continues to be regarded as a strategy for reordering political hierarchies. This political bias is reflective of what, in a recent article, Nancy Fraser has called the politics of affirmation.¹⁶ Fraser argues that while justice requires both recognition of difference and an insistence upon redistribution of socio-economic resources, currently the two have been disassociated from each other. Representation, on this analysis, would be a strategy of recognition rather than redistribution, thus limiting its transformative potential.

Fraser distinguishes two broad approaches to remedying injustice that occur across the recognition-redistribution divide. The first she calls the affirmation approach, which focuses on 'correcting inequitable outcomes of

social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them'.¹⁷ The second she calls the transformative remedy, which focuses on 'correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework'.¹⁸ Whereas affirmative remedies reinforce group difference, transformative remedies tend to destabilize them in the long run. Fraser sees the combination of socialism and deconstruction as the remedy best suited to resolving the recognition-redistribution dilemma. In doing so she seems to suggest that the disordering of group difference is the long term strategy best suited to the process of transformation. Young's argument with Fraser on this issue points to the problematic of setting up such binaries of analysis, and therefore positioning choices in a zero-sum fashion.¹⁹ However, Fraser's discussion of the recognition-redistribution dilemma does pose important questions for a study of gender and representation. How far can representation as a concept and strategy meet the needs of the majority of women? The debate in India about the concrete provisions of the quota legislation is salutary in this regard.

Social Backwardness and Quota Politics

What is evident from the introduction of the 81st Amendment Bill, and indeed from the legislative changes in the form of the 74th Amendment Act, is that political representation of women has become an important issue in Indian politics. The success of the women's movements in placing the issue of political under representation of women on the agenda of political parties and governments begs the questions, why and how? Why has this issue become important for the women's movement in the last decade, and how have women's movements been able to get recognition for this agenda? In part this is perhaps the result of the 'troubling impasse'²⁰ that the Indian women's movements are facing in the 1990s. The liberalization policies have seen women increasingly being pushed into the unorganized sector of work. The decline of the trade union movement – never very sensitive to women's issues in the first place, but changing under pressure of the women's movements – has also resulted in the increased vulnerability of working class women. Despite tremendous struggles waged by women's groups against violence against women, convictions have been established only with great difficulty. The late 1980s also saw the hardening of divisions among women's groups – between 'academic' and 'activists', between women on the right-wing and left-wing of politics, between those working with mass organizations and those working with international non-governmental organizations. In this context the early focus of women's groups – on women's work, violence, and capitalist relations in, and outside the home – became obscured. Together with these developments, the

international context of women's organizations changed. While the demand for women's inclusion in policy making institutions had appeared first in the late 1970s, it found increasing expression in the formulations of 'women's interests' in the late 1980s and gathered momentum with former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's proposals in 1991 for a reservation of seats for women in the village panchayats. Reservations (or quotas) have had a long and chequered history in India.

A History of 'Reservation' Policies

When the Indian state was taking shape, the question of caste was predominant in the debates about the crafting of a new constitution as well as a new social order. The arguments were cast in both philosophical and pragmatic terms. Political equality could not be realized without social and economic equality, which were attached to the whole edifice of social power. In India, the caste system is the 'steel frame' that has underpinned Hindu society despite all its polytheism and plurality. The inherent inequality of birth built into this system did not allow the individual the way out of the particular positioning within the social system. Individualization could not therefore work as a strategy for social mobility.

The Indian Constituent Assembly decided to enshrine in the constitution a special 9th Schedule that would allow the policies of affirmative action through reservations. At the pragmatic level it was clear to the Congress Party leadership that the consequences of not tackling this issue of caste-based inequality could only be political instability which a fledgling democracy could ill afford. The legislation was based on the idea of 'Social Backwardness' which was seen as a social 'placing [of] individuals/groups in particular disadvantageous position by delimiting their life chances'. The determinants of this 'social backwardness' were both the objective position of a group in terms of economic conditions in the social structure as well as the prevailing value system.²¹

A further amendment was made to the original legislation in 1951 which enables the state to make 'special provisions for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes' of citizens or for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Similar provision was made in Article 16(4) for reservation of posts in favour of any backward classes of citizens which in the opinion of the state 'is not adequately represented in the services under the state'. Both these clauses refer to 'classes of citizens' and not individuals; group (minority) rights were therefore acknowledged as important by the Indian political elites almost from start. This recognition is the basis of the quota debates and demands for women. However, the question of caste has posed very divisive questions for the women's groups engaged in these debates.

India has undergone a fracturing of its one-party dominant political system since the death of Mrs Indira Gandhi in 1984. Today, coalition politics, and caste interest groups are extremely visible and active in India. Parties based on regional and caste identities have gained prominence in the political processes and system. At the time of the consideration of the quota legislation for women in parliament in 1993–94, the party consensus that had allowed a smooth passage of the 73rd Amendment Act broke down on the question of caste representation within the quota for women. Political parties like the Janata Party and the Samta Party argued fiercely for the quota for women to be distributed along caste lines; that the caste-based reservation already in place should be reflected in the newly proposed quota for women. On the other hand, other regional parties such as the Tamil party All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIDMK) have supported the Bill and given vital support to the initiative at the time when it was most needed. The saga of the non-passage of the Bill shows the fluidity of the Indian political situation – a fluidity that women's groups have been able to take advantage of, and at the same time fallen foul of.

The Arguments for Quotas

The arguments for quotas for women in representative institutions are fairly well rehearsed. Development policies are highly politically charged trade-offs between diverse interests and value choices. 'The political nature of these policies is frequently made behind the closed door of bureaucracy or among tiny groups of men in a non-transparent political structure'.²² The question then arises, how are women to access this world of policy making so dominated by men? The answers that have been explored within the Indian women's movements have been diverse – political mobilization of women, lobbying political parties, moving the courts and legal establishments, constitutional reform, mobilization and participation in social movements such as the environmental movement, and civil liberties campaigns. It is only now, however, that women's groups have come together to demand increased representation of women in India's political institutions.

Women's groups are now arguing that quotas for women are needed to compensate for the social barriers that have prevented women from participating in politics and thus making their voices heard. That in order for women to be more than 'tokens' in political institutions, a level of presence that cannot be overlooked by political parties is required, hence the demand for a 33 per cent quota. The quota system acknowledges that it is the recruitment process, organized through political parties and supported by a framework of patriarchal values, that needs to carry the burden of change, rather than individual women. The alternative then is that there should be an

acknowledgement of the historical social exclusion of women from politics, a compensatory regime (quotas) established, and 'institutionalized ... for the explicit recognition and representation of oppressed groups'.²³ That this demand for quotas has been formulated first with respect to grass-roots institutions (panchayats), is reflective of the unease felt by many women's groups with elite politics and elite women.²⁴ The National Commission for Women, set up in 1991, has consistently supported the demand for a quota for women in parliament and other representative institutions. In the 1996 elections, it called for all women voters to exercise their franchise in favour of women candidates regardless of the political party they represented. This call was at one level the logical result of the Commission's support for quotas for women. If the purpose of the quotas is to increase the number of women in parliament, then the gender variable is the most important one to consider at the time of voting. However, women's groups in India have had close links with political parties.

This means that the question of representativeness is also tied closely to the question of political platforms:

In a system which is party-based, whether it is men or women, they will represent the viewpoint of the party ... Women voters while making their choice [of candidates] will have to judge which of these platforms will be closest to viewing their concerns with sympathy. They will also have to judge which of these platforms is intrinsically against women's equality and vote against the candidate regardless of whether it is a man or a woman.²⁵

This concern with party politics has been further increased by the growing mobilisation of women by the right-wing political parties in the name of cultural authenticity and the recognition of women as bulwarks against erosion of traditions, calling for a political response from the women's groups on the centre/left of politics.²⁶ The consensus on the quota policy has also evolved with the successful enactment of the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts. The feeling now is that these Acts will ensure a grass-roots political involvement of women; that as women become active in panchayat politics, their capabilities to participate in national politics will increase. The question of elitism will thus be answered.

The consensus on having a quota for women has also gained from the support (however ambivalent) of the political parties. I have pointed out the changing character of the Indian political system. With the break up of the old system of one-party domination there has also arisen the need for a mobilization of new constituencies. Women have been identified by most parties as one of the most important, and possibly the most neglected, constituency, that needs to be brought in to the political mainstream. This

mobilization has become an issue only because of the strength of the women's movement in India, but it has taken different forms when different political parties have sought to engage women.²⁷ The terms of engagement of various political parties have differed, and they have sought to highlight only their own political agendas in the debate. So, while the right wing has supported an undifferentiated quota for women, parties with significant lower caste constituencies have been generally more ambivalent, this even when reflecting upon the need to mobilize women into their parties. The pressure on political parties to support the quota has therefore been matched by their concern about the terms on which the quota is to be constructed.

So, as the consensus around the need for a quota has evolved, it has also raised new and important issues for women's groups and movements. In particular the question of how to deal with difference among women has been critical here. The current emphasis by women's groups on the representation of women in political institutions can thus be read in the light of the tension between on the one side the politics of universalism as symbolized in the Indian context in the debates about citizenship, and on the other side the constant and real fear of co-optation of the feminist projects by the political elites.

The Arguments Against Quotas

At the theoretical level two sets of arguments have been used: first, that any quota policy is against the principle of equal opportunity, and therefore, inherently undemocratic; that it is also against the principle of meritocracy. The second set of arguments are regarding the nature of interest representation – whose interests are being represented? Can women be regarded as a homogenous group? How are differences among women to be acknowledged and then translated into a quota policy? The motives of those opposing the Bill have been varied too. Some are moved by dilemmas that women's movements will have to face: 'It [the legislation] can either be an authentic expression of womanhood in politics, in which case it profoundly alters the way we all are, or it can be a device to co-opt women into structures of power and ways of authoritarian thinking ... and yet express a vision of the universe in which the male [remains] the principal agent ...'.²⁸ Others look clearly to the feasibility of such mechanisms of change: 'How can these poor women *panches* [panchayat members] oppose the same men whose fields they work for livelihood? First organize them and put economic power in their hands, only then can they oppose men.'²⁹

Then there are those who have initially supported the quota bills and then violently opposed them because of the issue of representation of different minority interests. The two political parties that have managed to scuttle the passage of the Bill – Samajwadi Party, and the Rashtriya Janata Dal – have

taken the position that to be fair, the Women's Reservation Bill has to reflect the caste distinctions prevalent in the country; that 'gender justice, abstracted from all other forms of social justice, is an urban middle-class concept and, therefore, of little use ...'.³⁰ These parties demand that the 33 per cent quotas be differentiated by a fixed quota for women belonging to OBCs (Other Backward Castes and minorities). The argument is also that the quota bill is 'the creation of a new constituency which is not defined by social or economic criteria, strictly speaking, and whose characteristics are, in fact totally unknown – even the representatives of this [reserved] constituency would be unable to say what it is that women stand for and men don't ...'.³¹ Finally, there is the issue of priorities – whether the Indian political system faced with many challenges can also deal with another 'divisive' issue: 'The country is facing many serious problems ... it was not the right time to bring the Women's Reservation Bill', said Prabhu Nath Singh of Samata (Equality) Party in the parliamentary debate on the Bill.³²

The debate on the quota bill has been bitter. Feminists and women's groups have come in for violent verbal abuse from those opposing the bill. They have been caricatured – 'short-haired memsahibs' and as 'biwi (wife) brigades'; their agendas have been called divisive for the country. However, the debate has also provoked considerable discussion of what is needed to make women's participation in politics meaningful, and how can there be an acknowledgement of differences among women at the same time as meeting the need for quotas for women in parliament. Most of the arguments have been framed by liberal politics: increased emphasis on education for girl children and women, gender-sensitive training of police, and bureaucrats, review of the functioning of family court and various laws relating to issues like divorce, adoption, and share of property for women have all been aired as development policies to ensure women's empowerment. The question before the feminist groups in India is how this increase in women's numbers within parliament and at the local level will result in real benefits for women, and women's movements.

Caste, Class, Gender: Dilemmas for Feminisms

If we examine the profile of the women representatives in the 1991–96 Indian parliament, we find that they were mostly middle-class, professional women, with little or no links with the women's movement. A significant number of them accessed politics through their families, some through various student and civil rights movements, and some because of state initiatives in increasing representation from the lower castes in India. This selective inclusion of women into mainstream politics has tended to maintain divisions within the women's movement posing difficult questions

for representation of and by women – between feminist/professionals and activists, and between women members of different political parties.³³

A survey of women MPs also suggests that these women have benefited from the growing strength of the women's movement, which has put the issues of women's empowerment and participation in politics on the national agenda, and to which various party political leaders have responded in different 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. 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 be approaching women MPs.³⁴

In the context of the discussion of difference among women, there are several interesting aspects of the debate about quotas in India. First, there is the consensus that has emerged among women's groups and political parties that quotas are a valid and much-needed strategy of enhancing women's participation. We need more information about how this consensus came to be crafted and on what terms. Second, that this consensus has been far more stable in the context of village and township council, that is lower levels of governance, than at the national level. We could ask whether this has something to do with the extent to which the *panchayat* level quotas have challenged social hierarchies, or is it more predictably about the reluctance of male elites to keep women out of national level institutions where power is concentrated?

Third, at various points, the question of greater representation has been discussed in terms of women 'transforming politics', by representing women's interests in a deeply patriarchal society, and also, especially in the context of high levels of political corruption (the expectation being that women will not behave in as corrupt a way as men do). Here, we could ask why are such burdens being placed on women and not men, but also more pertinently, given the discussion about differences among women, what are the philosophical bases upon which we can argue for greater representation of women in political institutions?

Fourth, the question of difference among women was raised in the

debates on quotas for women, in the first instance by men and not by the various women's groups. The result was a rather nasty and divisive debate where those demanding a quota for women were portrayed as manipulative, westernized feminists wishing to keep low-caste women out of the equation, and therefore working against the interests of the 'ordinary Indian woman'. This serious charge was only partially challenged by women's groups which were largely endorsing an undifferentiated quota strategy. This experience of the high political cost that women's groups had to pay for assuming that issues of difference could be put to one side in a deeply divided social context raises questions about strategizing. It establishes the importance of dealing with difference among women within socio-economic contexts of great inequality. Here a consideration of the particularity of the political system becomes extremely important. In the Indian context, the long-standing caste-based quotas should have been taken centrally into account by women's groups articulating demands for quotas for women. Also, consideration should have been given to the new alliances and fractures among political parties operating in an unfamiliar context of coalition politics, in a country where until recently one party, Congress dominated the political system and set the political agendas. Why an alliance of strong, sophisticated and active women's movements was unable to do so, is another issue that merits exploration.

Concluding Remarks

In making these points, this article is not arguing against the need for greater representation of women in political institutions, nor denying the positive impact that such representation can and has had. Neither does it in any sense intend to undervalue the campaigns and struggles on the part of women which have been and are still necessary, to make these advances possible. It is also not suggesting any easy correlation between class and social positioning with political behaviour. Instead the concern is to make a contribution to a more self-reflective analysis of what increasing representation on the basis of gender alone may mean in practice, and of what may be being erased in the process. For it remains the case that in India, and more broadly, the greater representation of women in politics is taking place at a time when the conditions of women with the least access to resources and the fewest privileges are steadily deteriorating. This more reflective approach is essential to constructing a politics of alliances that women and women's organizations must engage in now if they are to be effective, in a still largely male political terrain.

The Indian example has many insights to offer to women engaged in similar struggles in other countries and contexts. First, it points to the

'rethink' within the Indian women's movements regarding strategies of empowerment. A shift has occurred among these groups regarding an engagement with the state and its institutions. It is now increasingly seen as an essential part of women's struggles to improve their lives. This shift is so fundamental that it spans across party political lines, creating a new consensus on this issue. In the words of the doyenne of Indian Women's Studies, Vina Mazumdar, it is now accepted that 'politics is not a dirty word' for women. Changes in policy-making machineries are critical to the improvement of women's life chances.³⁵

Second, the Indian example points to the importance of levels of governance in crafting strategies of political empowerment if women are to engage with the state. The quota Bill in 1993 which provided for 33 per cent of seats in the village and town councils was passed without a murmur of opposition from any political party, and yet when something similar was demanded at the national level, the consensus fell apart. Disassociating empowerment politics from local politics allows us an explanation as well as a context for this discrepancy.

Third, the Indian example critically points to the importance of the recognition of difference among women and women's groups. Because women's groups arguing for the quota did not think it strategically necessary to proactively raise the issue of difference among women on the basis of caste, they were wrong-footed politically. Empowerment for whom? became the issue when they had sought to ask the question about empowerment for what?

Finally, the Indian example shows that there is no simple correlation between an enhanced visibility of women in political institutions and a sense of empowerment of 'women' in the polity in general. In short, the question of empowerment cannot be disassociated from the question of relations of power within different socio-political systems. In order to challenge structural impediments to greater participation of women in political institutions, we need to have regard to the multi-faceted power relations which contextualize that challenge. In this regard, the debates on empowerment need to be opened up to the questions raised above. Seductive as the language of empowerment is, it needs to and can be much more.

NOTES

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