



New Delhi, August, 2014

WOMEN AND POLITICS: TRENDS FROM THE 16TH GENERAL ELECTION

BY PAMELA PHILIPOSE

- The gap between the voter participation of men and women in the General Election 2014 has narrowed down to 1.46 percentage points from 4.42 percentage points in 2009 (67.09 per cent male voters and 65.63 per cent female voters in 2014 as against 60.24 per cent male voters and 55.82 per cent female voters in 2009).
- Despite the significant increase of women as voters there has been no commensurate expansion in women's representation in Parliament during India's 16th General Elections. Women fail to influence political decision making and remain marginalised as a political category.
- To a large extent, this can be attributed to the patriarchal order that decides how and to what extent women access the public space both as electors and as candidates.

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India's 16th General Election is marked by many ruptures with the past. Notable among them is the end of the 10 year rule of the Congress led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and the rightward shift marked by the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its chief helmsman, Narendra Modi. The fact that the election saw the Indian National Congress (INC) record the worst performance in its history, managing just 44 seats in the Lok Sabha or Lower House, even as the BJP went on to win an unprecedented 282 seats, is comment enough on the emphatic nature of this electoral outcome.

One has to wait and see how these developments will impact the women of India. However, the election process itself revealed certain important trends in terms of the participation and representation of women in mainstream Indian politics.

Before dwelling on the immediate realities, it may be useful to revisit some historical

aspects of gender and politics in India. There can be no denying that right from the days of Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu, who had campaigned indefatigably for India's freedom in the early decades of the 20th century, there have been women who have participated in national politics. The fact remains, however, that they have always constituted a numerically insignificant force and have failed to influence political decision making in any significant way. This is a reflection not just of the many discriminations and general disempowerment that women in the country have historically experienced, but of the complexity that defines women as a political category. Factors like class, religion, caste, education, even marital status, have gone into deciding how women exercised their right of franchise and engagement with the State. In a largely conservative social universe where, to borrow Marilyn French's phrase, "not all men have power but only men have power", it was the patriarchal order that dictated how and to what

extent a woman accessed the public space, both in terms of casting their ballots and in standing for elections themselves.

The highly masculinised, criminalised and money-driven election process – the 2014 General Election was estimated to have cost over US\$ 5 billion – is another seriously discouraging factor. As early as 1974, the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women had noted that “the greatest deterrent to women’s active participation as candidates is the increasing expense of elections”. The Report added that “threats of violence and character assassinations” had increased greatly and were major reasons why more women did not enter politics in the country.

Four decades have passed since that Report but the situation on the ground has remained the same, more or less. A recent study, ‘Violence against Women in Politics’, conducted in the three South Asian countries of India, Nepal and Pakistan (brought out by the Delhi-based Centre for Social Research and UN Women) revealed that more than 60 per cent of women do not participate in politics due to the fear of violence. According to the study, which analysed incidents of violence against

women in politics that occurred between 2003 and 2013, an estimated 45 per cent of women candidates in India faced physical violence and threats in comparison to 16 per cent in Nepal. Many women also reported that they were actively prevented, not just from joining a political party or contesting elections, but from something as basic as voting. This should come as no surprise. Women Studies academics like Yasmin Tambiah had long written about how, in South Asia, the public/private divide was constituted and operated in gendered terms, with masculinity associated with the public, worldly space, and femininity with the private, domestic realm.

To address such a divide, the Status of Women Committee had argued for quotas for women at the grassroots level but maintained that since women were merely a “category” and not a “community”, reserving seats for them at the parliamentary and state levels may not be tenable. Interestingly, two of the Committee’s illustrious members, Lotika Sarkar and Vina Mazumdar, disagreed with this reasoning and argued that their interactions with women across India had convinced them that “as such quotas were necessary, not only at the level

of local governance, but also in higher legislative bodies”.

It took the country almost another two decades to come up with the Women’s Reservation Bill, mandating 33 per cent of seats for women in the state assemblies and in Parliament. That Bill has, however, continued to remain in a limbo despite getting the assent of the Rajya Sabha, or Upper House, in 2010. The manner in which the Bill was prevented from being passed in the Lower House by powerful, male-dominated vested interests operating within the heart of the political system has come to embody in a microcosm the challenge of making Indian politics more gender just and democratic at the macro level.

General Elections in a country as large as India, involving hundreds of thousands of voters, are major markers in the evolution of Indian democracy. Did the 16th General Election, which took place in April-May 2014, bring India any closer to the desired goal of greater gender equality in the political sphere? An answer to this question could be attempted along three broad planes: the manifesto pledges made by the major parties in this election; the political discourse that was generated

during the campaigning; and the electoral outcome in terms of gender participation and representation.

Manifesto Promises

Party manifestos have been defined as public declarations of the party’s principles and intentions, and reveal the ideologies that characterise them. Additionally, a manifesto can be read as a governance road map of the concerned party, should it come to power.

So what did the larger parties promise the voter in their manifestos this time in terms of women’s issues? The Women’s Reservation Bill, guaranteeing 33 per cent reservations for women in Parliament and in state assemblies, was a popular promise and it was showcased in the manifestos of all the mainstream parties, apart from those like the Samajwadi Party (SP), which had always actively opposed the Bill.

This time, a relatively new theme that also figured prominently in party manifestos was the promise to address sexual violence. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stated that it would ensure the “strict implementation of laws related to women, particularly those related to rape” and establish funds for the

“rehabilitation” and “welfare” of victims of rape and acid attacks. The Indian National Congress (INC), on its part, assured its voters that it would bring in fast-track courts and establish facilities for ‘in-camera’ proceedings in state headquarters and regional centres for the sole purpose of addressing crimes against women. The new political party, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) even maintained that it would ensure that each government agency produced a detailed action plan to implement laws to end violence against women.

Across the board, the promise of police reform and crisis centres also figured in these documents, with some parties pledging to set up all-women police stations. The fact that violence against women figured prominently in political manifestos this time, testified to the new public visibility that the issue had gained in the wake of the New Delhi gang rape of December 2012. The perception that it could be a factor in influencing voter behaviour was encouraged by the fact that the INC, which was in power when that horrific assault had taken place, was soundly defeated exactly a year after the incident, despite having ruled in Delhi for 15 years.

While this professed concern for women’s security inherent in most manifestos should be welcomed, it is equally important to note that the idiom adopted was that of the State as a guardian authority which would protect the vulnerable ‘woman subject’ from sexual violence, rather than a democratic institution committed to protecting her inviolable constitutional right to be free of sexual violence. It was telling that no party referred to domestic violence, ventured into a sensitive territory like marital rape, or pledged to prevent the brutal treatment meted out to women in conflict zones like the Kashmir Valley and the Northeast.

The declining sex ratio, a major concern in contemporary India, figured only in passing in the INC manifesto, and more frontally in the AAP document that iterated that the party would “work towards its complete elimination by strengthening and implementing legislation against its practice”. While the language of rights did make an occasional appearance – both the INC and the BJP manifestos promised that they would protect women’s rights to land, while the AAP pledged to ensure “equal pay for equal work” – the overall approach continued to be marked by

an all-too-familiar patriarchal tokenism. A party like the Tamil Nadu-based All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) took this approach a step further by vowing to provide “marriage assistance” for women from poor families in the form of “Rs 25,000 and 4 grams of gold”. That such pledges were popular with voters was soon made evident when the AIADMK went on to win 37 of the 39 seats in the state of Tamil Nadu.

Electoral Discourse

Coming to the public conversations that marked this election, once again the patriarchal biases were much in evidence. Much of the discourse again focused on violence against women, driven possibly by opinion polls which had indicated that for a majority of Indian voters ending violence against women had become a priority after the New Delhi gang rape. Yet the discourse that did get generated seemed to flow, not from any deep concern over a woman’s right to autonomy and bodily integrity, but the familiar drive to score political points. When the two main prime ministerial candidates – Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi – dwelt on the subject, their lack of introspection and capacity to critically

reflect on the records of their respective parties was obvious. While Gandhi attacked Modi for the Snoopgate episode and the electronic surveillance of private women citizens, the Congress’s own inept handling of the New Delhi gang rape was never owned up to adequately. Similarly, while Modi attacked the Congress ruled New Delhi government, the horrific violence that women faced in Gujarat in 2002 or in Muzaffarnagar ten years later, was studiously avoided. In fact by defining women’s security in the narrowest of terms, both these leaders tended to consciously or unconsciously neglect a broad spectrum of issues that are critical for women’s security – from decent employment and a living wage to maintenance upon divorce.

More disturbing still was the deliberate coarsening of the electoral lexicon that was seen this time. The number of times the word ‘rape’, for instance, was bandied about during electioneering was a measure of how disturbingly normalised misogynist language had become in Indian politics. There was even an instance of Trinamool Congress candidate Tapas Pal threatening to ask his men to rape “CPM women” from a podium shortly after winning from the

West Bengal constituency of Krishnanagar.

When SP leader, Mulayam Singh Yadav argued, while addressing an election rally in Moradabad in his home state of Uttar Pradesh, that leniency needed to be shown to rapists because rapes were essentially “mistakes committed by boys”, it shows how impervious even senior politicians are to recognising the grave dangers inherent in the rape culture that has come to mark Indian society.

To counter such blatant sexism and help foster norms of gender equality that continue to elude electoral politics in India, women activists attempted to influence the political discourse in a more concerted manner than they had possibly ever done in any General Election earlier. Undeterred by the fact that theirs was a minority voice, they went ahead and put their concerns before voters through interventions that ranged from the cultural to the political.

One Himachal Pradesh based group came out with a cassette of songs for the elections which called upon women to raise questions of the political leader. *“Hamari vote, hamari takat”* – our vote is our strength, they sang. Similarly,

just before the important political constituency of Varanasi went to vote, over 30 women’s groups – most of them based in Uttar Pradesh – came together to organise a cultural event in the heart of the city on May 1 or Labour Day. Stating that they stood for the kind of politics that was free of strife and which protected their rights, these women stated that they wanted “political leaders who understood their dreams and brought those dreams to earth.”

Another innovative step taken by representatives of the autonomous women’s movement was the drawing up of a six-point ‘National Womanifesto 2014’, to encourage political candidates and parties participating in the election to promote women’s concerns. Among the six critical demands they urged political parties to agree on, was the demand that a comprehensive, well-funded and long-term public education programme be set up to end the culture of gender-based discrimination and violence. They also wanted political parties to support amendments to laws that perpetuate violence and discrimination against women and sexual minorities; and ensure secure, dignified, remunerative

employment for women.

While the impact of the 'Womanifesto' may have been limited, given the predominantly patriarchal nature of Indian politics, it contributed to making the election discourse a little more layered and gender sensitive.

Election Outcomes

The campaign for the General Election of 2014 was historic in many ways. It was the longest exercise of its kind in the history of India, held in nine phases from April 7 to May 12. An unprecedented 1,687 registered political parties took part and around 554 million people cast their ballots.

Significant in terms of the women participation was the fact the election saw an almost 10 per cent increase in the turnout of women voters, with 65.63 per cent of registered female voters exercising their franchise this time. The interesting aspect about this figure is that it underlines the fact that the gap between the voter participation of men and women in the country has narrowed down to 1.46 percentage points from 4.42 percentage points in 2009 (67.09 per cent

male voters and 65.63 per cent female voters in 2014 as against 60.24 per cent male voters and 55.82 per cent female voters in 2009). In fact, the nine states/ union territories of Arunachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Goa, Odisha, Puducherry, Punjab, Sikkim, Uttarakhand and Bihar saw more women turning up to vote than men.

There has been a steady rise in the number of women electors over the years, a phenomenon termed as a 'silent revolution' by academics Mudit Kapoor and Shamika Ravi, after they found that the number of female voters for every 1,000 male voters had risen from 715 in 1960s to 883 in 2000s, even while the male voting participation had remained roughly the same. It was 'silent' because it was completely self-driven and not due to any incentives or blandishments from external agencies. The trend may be seen as reflecting the aspirations of the ordinary women of India to influence election outcomes.

The long, gruelling General Election campaign of 2014 saw 62 women (11 per cent) and 481 men (89 per cent) enter the Lok Sabha. Much has been made of the fact that this number was the highest

in terms of female representation in the history of parliamentary democracy in India, but the increase is statistically insignificant. Just three more women were elected this time in comparison to the previous General Election of 2009. This underlined a significant paradox. While this election saw the participation of women as voters rise sharply, there has not been a commensurate expansion of women's representation in Parliament.

This seems to indicate that Indian voters, regardless of whether they were men or women, continued to be unreceptive to the idea of women emerging as leaders at the national level. It also meant that to assume that women voters would necessarily vote for women candidates would be incorrect. An analysis of the election data by The Hindu newspaper came to the conclusion that "women were no more likely to win from the 100 constituencies where female voters outnumbered male voters in 2014, than they were from the 443 other constituencies."

The psychological barriers to women's political participation have proved as considerable as physical ones. The very framing of the female subject, whether

by political parties or voters, continued to be marked by patriarchal attitudes and assumptions, with women being projected as "protectors of national values" and "guardians of the family" and being expected to conform to these ideals even at the expense of realizing their own rights, including their right to be political actors. According to the CSR/UN Women study quoted above, 50 per cent of the respondents interviewed felt that the decision about whether a woman should participate in electoral politics had to be taken by her family rather than the woman herself.

Parveen Rai, in a 2011 paper entitled 'Electoral Participation of Women in India: Key Determinants and Barriers', had argued that despite the Indian Constitution granting women equal rights to participate in electoral competition, "the existing societal value system, the private-public divide in terms of domain identification and male preponderance in political institutions restrict women from exercising their electoral rights and a fair participation in electoral competition." Nothing has changed significantly since that observation was made.

Political parties have also rendered meaningless their claim to being sensitive to women by simultaneously fielding unsavoury candidates, some of whom were guilty of heinous sexual crimes. This election was no exception, with party leaders citing the “winnability factor” to justify such duplicity. The “winnability factor” was also the reason, ostensibly, that political parties fielded women for reasons that were largely frivolous, as the disproportionate number of film stars figuring in the list of women candidates this time showed. Whether it was a Nagma contesting on an INC ticket from Meerut, a Moon Moon Sen standing for Trinamool Congress in the Bankura Lok Sabha constituency, or a Smriti Irani, Hema Malini and Kirron Kher fielded by the BJP in the constituencies of Amethi, Mathura and Chandigarh respectively, each woman was selected largely for her crowd drawing potential.

Such a tokenist approach to female representation results in the eventual under-representation of dynamic women in the Lok Sabha who are willing to take the risks required to make the political and policy-making space more equitable. Women too invested in the existing political

system, too timorous to defy the status quo or take on male leaders, and who lacked an understanding of the gender concerns of the day, cannot be expected to usher in a politics of change.

As for the future, the question that emerged from India’s 16th General Election is this: could the rising participation of women in electoral politics translate into more gender equal representation in Parliament and, in turn, to more gender sensitive policy making? It could, but that would need several urgent steps to be taken, including institutional reform, voter education, inner party democracy and the passage of supportive legislation like the Women’s Reservation Bill.

 GLOSSARY

AAP	Aam Aadmi Party
AIADMK	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CPM	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CSR	Centre for Social Research
ICSSR	Indian Council of Social Science Research
INC	Indian National Congress
SP	Samajwadi Party
UN Women	United Nations Women
UPA	United Progressive Alliance

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