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GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Gendered Representation: Women's Participation and Parity in Karnataka's Politics



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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Parliament is the theatre of Indian democracy. Given the limitations of electoral democracy, it is questionable to what extent these institutions in India, like the National Parliament and State Assemblies, include all its citizens or adequately represent its diversity (Rai and Spary, 2019; Jayal, 2013). It's imperative to address the gaps in political science literature on the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies as the sites of gendered representation in India's electoral democracy. How this fulcrum of power at the state level continues to keep most women out by making it a majorly male-playing arena only and goes on to flout the central premise on which it was created- to be a democratic place for representation. By refusing to allow more women to enter its corridors of power is it reinforcing the political norm of gender inequality already existing in society and in politics? Are parliaments and assemblies, the symbols of democracy and representativeness, becoming sites that are perpetrating and recreating gender inequality?

Feminist Theorising of Political Representation

It needs to be critiqued how the persistent underrepresentation of women in Parliament affects our reception of the performance of representation and the claims of being a strong democracy in the broader politics of the country? (Rai and Spary, 2019) Can we still call Parliament and Legislative Assembly a 'gendered institution' given the percentage of women who get to step inside it is such a small percentage compared to women? How does this connect, if at all it does impact the circulation of ideas and the consequences of this circulation in terms of discursive and policy shifts in India?

Institutional Approach

Institutions cannot be understood as unrelated to or not impacted by the broader socio-economic-political context of the society within which they are embedded. How functional they are as institutions, symbolic, enmeshed in networks of power that are socio-economic, as well as performative? Gender, today is caught at the crossroads of the intersectionality of the politics of identity and representation. More women in politics, in political arenas like parliaments simply mean fewer men. The prospect of increasing 'presence' of women thus threatens already fragile masculinity. While feminists have argued for gender quotas on the pretext of increasing women's representation, it cannot deny that the identity here gets juxtaposed with caste. Very often lower caste men do not favour the increasing presence of women in political arenas as that would lessen the chances of their own representation. Thus, unwillingly, gender 'representation' gets fraught with caste as a 'collective identity'. Today the argument for 'a politics of presence' (Phillips, 1995) makes it imperative to reconceptualise what it means to act politically in the interests of women (Dhanda, 2000).

The word leader today is losing its gender reference point. Is gender, institutional structure, role, environment, or some other variable key to understanding executive performance? When it comes to women as political leaders certain critical questions from all across the world stare at our faces, why are Americans reluctant to support a woman as President – "the dystopian presidential narrative of the world's oldest surviving democracy" as Genovese and Steckendeir point out, while Norway's Gro Harlem Bruntland won a plethora of groundbreaking policies to promote gender equality (ranging from political leadership to child care and parental leave policies), Margaret Thatcher in UK had rejected and even vilified the women's movement and firmly denounced policies aimed at women's equality. (2013)

Karnataka and Women in Politics

Women's participation is a milestone in the history of the South-Indian state of Karnataka. It was way back in 1930 that, for the first time in the history of the old Mysore state, Smt. Sakamma and Smt. Kamalamma Dasappa, two women, entered the Mysore representative assembly. The next year, a significant first step was taken to amend the Hindu law regarding the rights of women, and the widow's ability to adopt children, all progressive steps towards expanding the gambit of rights for women. Karnataka had its first woman speaker in its Legislative Assembly in K.S. Nagarathamma from 1972-78, a lady who was elected from the star Gundlupet Constituency, with only a single break in 1978.

Karnataka is a state where some amazing women have held leadership positions. Leeladevi R Prasad, applauded the then Chief Minister of Karnataka, Shri Ramakrishna Hegde for addressing this situation and bringing about reservation for women in the State local bodies and also in the cooperative movement. (2003:16) Hegde, considered a champion of democratic decentralisation, passed the Karnataka Zilla Panchayat, Taluk Panchayat, Mandal Panchayat, and Nyaya Panchayat Act in 1983, reduced the age of voting to these elective bodies to 18, and reserved thirty per cent of seats in these bodies for women. This Act served as a model for the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act enacted by the Central Government in 1993. Many opine that if not for 50 per cent reservation at the local level that was introduced by Ramakrishna Hegde in the state way back in the early 1980s the state would not have seen such representation of women that it does today. In fact, this Karnataka model of reservation for women was later adopted by others, including the late Prime Minister Shri Rajiv Gandhi in the 64th Amendment to the Constitution of India.

1962 remains the only year when 18 women legislators won seats into the Karnataka State Assembly. In 1967, K. S. Nagarathanamma became the first female candidate to become an MLA in Karnataka after defeating K. B. Jayadevappa. But post 1963, this number has declined steadily and has been in single digits, except in 1989, when 10 women MLAs were elected. Karnataka's 14th Legislative Assembly had less than 3 per cent women with only six elected women and one nominated in its entire strength of 225. There were a total of 175 female candidates of the 2945 candidates. The Congress gave tickets to 8; the BJP had 7 contestants and JD(S) scored high among the parties with 12 candidates in the fray. Sixty-seven of the women were independents.

In Karnataka's 15th Assembly election, seven out of 222, or 3.1 percent of the winners were women. That is the one more than in the previous election in 2013. The number of women, who threw

their hats into the ring and contested elections was 219 or 7 per cent of the total and was higher in 2018 than in 2013 (175 out of a total of 2,945). Besides while the number of women voters rose by 0.11 crore as in 2013 it was 2.13 crore, in 2018 it rose to 2.44 crore, comprising 49 per cent of the total number of voters. But where did it and does this slight increase in women coming out to vote translate into women winning more seats?

Women Members of Parliament (MPs) from Karnataka

In the 18th Lok Sabha, elected in 2024, women constitute 13.6 per cent of the members, a slight decrease from the 14.3 per cent representation of the 17th Lok Sabha elected in 2019 which saw the highest-ever number of women MPs. Specifically, the 18th Lok Sabha includes 74 women MPs out of a total of 543 seats, marking a minor decline from the 78 women MPs previously. Ironically, 2023 saw the passage of the historic women's reservation bill in Parliament, mandating that women occupy at least 33 per cent of the seats in state legislative assemblies and the Lok Sabha. This modest decrease in women's representation highlights the persistent challenges in achieving gender parity in Indian politics, emphasising the need for stronger measures and reforms to foster a more equitable and inclusive political environment. In 2019, after a gap of fifteen years, two women from Karnataka made it to the Lok Sabha. They were Smt. Shobha Karandlaje from Udupi-Chikkamagaluru whose political career saw a pivotal moment in 2014 when she secured the Udupi-Chikmagalur Lok Sabha seat with a margin of 1.81 lakh votes, catapulting her into national politics and Smt. Sumalatha from Mandya constituency. In the 2024 parliamentary elections in Karnataka, Dr. Prabha Mallikarjun and Priyanka Jarkiholi emerged victorious from the Davangere and Chikkodi constituencies, respectively. BJP's Shobha Karandlaje has emerged victorious from Bangalore North constituency making her one of the few women who have represented Karnataka in the parliament for three consecutive terms.

Their predecessors way back in 2004 were Tejaswini Gowda (who had won as a Congress candidate from the then Kanakapura constituency against JD(S) supremo H.D. Deve Gowda) and Manorama Madhwaraj (who had won from Udupi on a BJP ticket). While the highest number of women from the state at the Lok Sabha was in 1991 when three women Basavarajeshwari, D.K. Taradevi and Chandraprabha Urs were elected as MPs, the 16th and 15th Lok Sabha had only one woman from Karnataka namely Shobha Karandlaje in 2014 (who that year was the only woman to win out of 20 women in the fray that year) and J. Shantha from the BJP in 2009. No women got representation in 1990 and 1998. Way back in 1962, Smt Sarojini Mahishi became the first woman MP to be elected to the LS from Karnataka was in 1962 when she contested and won from the Dharwad North Lok Sabha constituency.

Finally commenting parallelly, the Karnataka Panchayat Raj (Amendment) Bill, 2010, which reserves 50 per cent seats at local government level in Karnataka, remains paradoxical where women at the grassroots of governance act as mere proxies for their husbands. The sarpanch-pati culture is prevalent all over the nation thus stripping women of their political and decision-making powers. In India, women hold 15 per cent of seats in national parliaments, which is lower than the global average of 27 per cent. "Typically, achieving a critical mass of 30 per cent representation by women in Parliament is known to yield positive outcomes for women's empowerment", says Susan Ferguson, UN Women's India Country Representative.

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