

Women And Political Representation

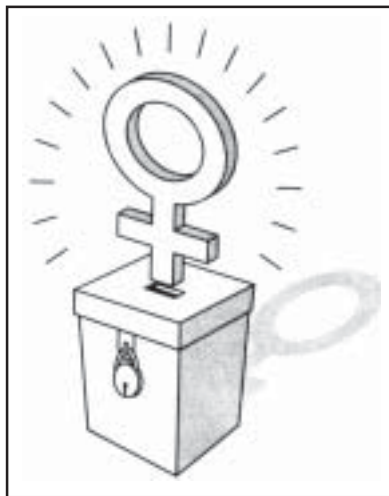
○ P.B. Rathod

THE final decade of the 20th century is witnessing a dramatic increase in women's participation in politics throughout the world. Of the 32 women who have served as presidents or prime ministers in this century, 24 (75 per cent) were in power in the 1990s. The Inter-Parliamentary Union reports that in 1998 there were only eight countries with no women in their legislatures. The number of women ministers at the cabinet level world wide doubled in a decade, from 3.4 per cent in 1987 to 6.8 per cent in 1996. From 1987 to 1996, the number of countries without any women ministers dropped from 93 to 48, and 15 countries reported that women held more than 20 per cent of all ministerial level positions.

Though this progress is remarkable, it is far from satisfactory. The average share of women in national legislatures was only 13 per cent as of the end of 1998. Regional averages vary from 37.6 per cent in Nordic countries to 3.5 per cent in Arab countries. The factors that affect women's representation in national parliaments have been a matter of debate among academics. A complex combination of socio-economic, cultural and institutional factors account for most of the variation in women's representation in legislatures.

The view that women's political participation increases with social and economic development is presumably supported by data from

the Nordic countries, where there are higher proportions of women legislators than in less developed countries. But not all women in the developed countries have satisfactory levels of representation in their national legislatures. Of the 46 developed countries that reported electoral data in 1998, 14 had fewer than 10 per cent women legislators in their lower house. In this category fall such developed and industrialised countries as France, Greece and Japan. The situation is no better regarding national level ministerial positions. Women in the USA, even today, are only marginally better represented, with 11.7 per cent in the House of Representatives. By contrast, certain less developed countries such as South Africa, Argentina, Cuba, Vietnam and Mozambique have between 25 and 30 per cent women legislators in their lower legislative chambers.



ANOOP KAMATH

Increased participation of women in economic activity is considered a favourable factor for women's increased political representation. However, in the Asia-Pacific region, there are 11 countries where more than 70 per cent of women above 15 years of age are economically active. But among them, only three nations have more than 10 per cent women legislators.

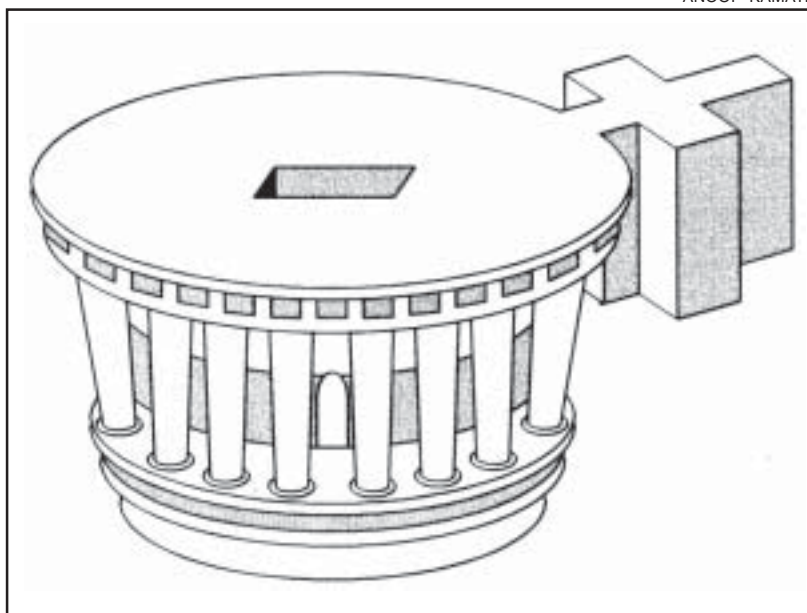
It is thought that illiteracy is one of the factors responsible for the low level of women's participation in politics. But most of the developed countries that have achieved remarkable success in female literacy have not achieved the same level of success in political power sharing. Of the 46 developed countries, only three nations—Portugal, Malta and Yugoslavia—report a more than 10 per cent illiteracy rate among women above 25 years. But 14 of these 46 developed countries have fewer than 10 per cent women legislators.

Another hypothesis is that the type of political system has a bearing on women's political participation. There is a belief that nations with democratic systems tend to have a higher proportion of women in their legislatures than nations with authoritarian systems. But evidence shows that this is true only in the case of the Nordic countries, where 37.6 per cent of the legislators are women. Most democratic countries in other regions have less than 20

per cent women in their legislatures. However, communist regimes such as those of Cuba, Vietnam, China and North Korea have 20 to 30 per cent women in their legislatures. Among the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union and former member countries of the Eastern Bloc, women's representation dropped from the earlier highs of 25 to 35 per cent under communist rule to around 8 to 15 per cent today.

A commonly held belief is that the level of women's political participation is inextricably linked to the culture of the country. This belief is supported by data from most of the Islamic countries. These nations, with a lot of curbs against women in public life, have consistently registered the lowest levels of their representation in national legislatures. The Inter-parliamentary Union reports that at the end of 1998 the Arab states had only 3.5 per cent women legislators. However, in other nations with a dominant Islamic culture such as Indonesia, Syria and Bangladesh, women have 9 to 12 per cent of national legislative seats, almost equal to the world average. We need to also recall that women such as Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh have wielded political power at the highest levels in Muslim societies.

It is true that Nordic countries, where women's political participation is the highest among all regions, have a women-friendly political culture, better levels of socio-economic development and higher literacy. But even in these Nordic nations the single factor most responsible for the higher representation of women is institutional. Most Nordic countries follow some variant of proportional representation for women in political parties that results in their



electing a higher proportion of women representatives to their national legislatures.

Are institutional factors the major determinants of women's representation in legislatures? An analysis of cross national data on women in legislatures supports this conclusion. Different kinds of electoral laws and voting systems play an important role in increasing women's representation. Many nations stipulate a quota for women legislators expressed as a percentage of the seats in the national legislature or as a percentage of the candidates a political party nominates. In one-party dominated states such as Cuba and Vietnam these methods directly determine the higher percentage of women legislators. In Sweden and similar democratic countries the party quota route is a major source of higher representation for women.

In some other countries special characteristics of their current electoral systems also seem to discourage all but a small proportion of women from gaining seats in the national legislature. For example, the widely practised single member

constituency system used in India is not favourable to the cause of women legislators. Instead, more women are elected in countries with an electoral system based on proportional representation in which more than two candidates are elected in each constituency from a list of candidates presented by various political parties and organisations. Electoral systems are a factor whatever be the method by which legislators are selected, whether by secret ballot, as in democratic countries, or by a variety of other methods, as in authoritarian nations.

The single member constituency electoral system usually results in a denial of proportional representation to various sections of the electorate besides women. It can often discriminate against minority groups and under-privileged sections, and discourage voter turnout. These problems can be traced to a fundamental flaw in the system—only those who voted for the winning candidate get their chosen representative. Those who make up more than 50 per cent of the electorate in a constituency may

end up without the representative of their choice. For instance, a Congress candidate in a predominantly BJP constituency or a Muslim in a predominantly Hindu constituency would be more likely to be shut out by our current electoral system. It can often happen that the candidate of a majority of voters will not be elected. Under the single member constituency system voters will often find their most preferred candidate highly unlikely to win.

In India, the latest legislative initiative to increase women's political representation proposes to set aside 33 per cent of legislative seats for women. If enacted, it will result in an increase in women in the national legislature simply because it requires a certain percentage of women to be elected. The number of women in the Lok Sabha would increase to 182 in one stroke, from the current level of 43 MPs (8.1 per cent). Elsewhere in the world, quotas also account for an increase in female representation. In the Argentine House of Representatives quotas resulted in an increase from 4 per cent in 1991 to over 16 per cent in 1993 to 28 per cent in 1995. In Brazil, when quotas were used in the 1997 Congressional elections, women legislators increased by nearly 40 per cent from the previous election. In Great Britain, when quotas were used in the last elections to the House of Commons, female representation doubled to 18 per cent.

However, a mandatory quota system has serious flaws in a single member system. Oddly, making the system more gender balanced will also, at the same time, make the system less representative of other choices of the voters. The proposed law requires that parliament contain a certain minimum proportion of women MPs. In India, where several political parties vie for a single seat,

we often elect candidates with less than 50 per cent of the total valid votes cast. For example, by reserving a certain percentage of seats for women we may as a consequence be restricting the likelihood of getting those who belong to Other Backward Castes elected. Most people vote for a party or ideology rather than with a candidate's gender uppermost in mind. At present there are not enough viable women candidates for political parties to nominate in every constituency proposed to be reserved for them. Therefore, a party that has a strong popular base in a constituency will be compelled to return a lower profile woman candidate rather than a stronger man as a candidate. As a result, the performance of the legislature is likely to be even worse than at present. It is true that there is deadwood among our male MPs. But there is no guarantee that the seats reserved for women will be those of the badly performing MPs. The usual anomalies of the single member constituency system will continue even if the quota

system for women is added on to it. Since there is only one MP from each constituency, it is likely that, due to these gender requirements, minor ethnic groups and political parties will go under-represented.

The problem of inadequate representation to women, minorities and other social groups will be more likely to be alleviated if the nation adopts one of the proportional representation systems, for instance, the party-list system, the single transferable vote system, or a mixed proportional system with multi-member constituencies. These alternatives make it less likely for some groups to get representation while others are left out. The basic principle underlying proportional representation is that all voters deserve representation and all political groups deserve to be represented in legislatures in proportion to their strength in the electorate. □

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