

Opinion

MUSLIM WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS

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After World War II a pledge was taken by almost every nation to empower women and make necessary amendments in their Constitutions to provide equal rights to women as they were also an integral part of society, and excluding them would diminish the chances of all round development. But rarely there were occasions when they were treated at par with their male counterparts. Demographically, they constitute an equal part of the population, but not even a single indicator shows their equal status with men in any stream, be it social, economic or political. In the case of minority women, it becomes a double disadvantage.

Our Constitution provides rights to women. Various Acts have been formulated from time to time to empower them. Different schemes at Central and state levels are also formed; strong steps are taken towards positive discrimination in order to bring them into the mainstream. But all these provisions look perfect on paper. In reality, quite often a gender gap is evident. And Muslim women are worst hit.

In the field of politics their low representation and lower visibility stand out. In many countries women were granted "right to vote" after a long and hard struggle. Though India is the largest democracy and women of all religions have got the adult suffrage together with men. The Preamble of the Constitution says¹;

WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens:

JUSTICE social, economic and political;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;

EQUALITY of status and of opportunity;

and to promote among them all

FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation;

The word socialist is used for social and economic equality and to show that there shall be no discrimination on the basis of caste, colour, creed, sex, religion and language.

We have well taken care of the caste system in India, but our efforts are not enough in case of sex and religion. Though the word democracy itself signifies that everyone should be equal and can vote if s/he is above 18 and not otherwise debarred by the law, and can also contest provided the other requirements are met as per the rule. Despite fulfilling the requirement we never found occasions in any of the 16 Lok Sabhas' life as well as in the state legislatures when women were represented equally.

Since Independence around 612 women have been elected to 16 Lok Sabhas, of them around 21 have been Muslim women.

Table 1: Women particularly Muslim Women in 16 Lok Sabha

Lok Sabha	Total Number Elected	Total Women Elected	Muslim women Elected	Projected No. of Muslim Women (@7)
1	543	24	Nil	38
2	534	24	02	37.3
3	540	37	02	37.8
4	553	33	Nil	38.7
5	553	28	Nil	38.7
6	557	21	03	38.99
7	566	32	02	39.6
8	567	45	03	39.6
9	534	28	Nil	37.3
10	555	42	01	38.8
11	551	41	02	38.5
12	546	44	Nil	38.2
13	567	52	01	39.6
14	586	52	02	41
15	560	64	03	39
16	541	63	03	37.8

Courtesy: <http://164.100.47.132/LssNew/members/lokprev.aspx>

If the Muslim women were represented according to their proportion of population they would have been always around more than 35 in number. (Consider 13.5% Muslims Population of the total national population, since female population is almost equal to the male population, it may be assumed that half of the 13.5% or 7% would be Muslim women) But Muslim women's membership never went beyond three in any of the sixteen Lok Sabhas. There are about five occasions when no single Muslim woman was there.

So far as Rajya Sabha is concerned, there were about 242 Members (as on October 28, 2014) of whom 30 were women, but only 4 women members were Muslim². From 1952 to 2010, there were only 15 Muslim women who entered the Upper House either through separate process of election or nomination.

State Legislatures: The picture is not much different at the state level. Less than 8% women are represented in the state Assemblies.³ Muslim women are almost negligible. In Assam Legislative Assembly, there are 14 women members, of whom only one is a Muslim woman⁴.

Political Heads and Executive: Their presence at the top position is negligible. We had so far 16 Lok Sabha elections, but the country saw only one woman Prime Minister.

Muslim men or women so far have not enjoyed this position. Similarly, there is only one occasion when the incumbent of the office of the President of India was a woman, but Muslim women are yet to open their account.

So far as states are concerned, of 29 states and 7 Union Territories only three states are headed by women⁵ as chief minister, but none of them is a Muslim. Out of the Governors and Lt Governors/Administrators of 29 states and seven Union Territories, only two are women, but there is no Muslim woman.

Structure of the Government: The political wing of the state is divided into ministries. These ministries are headed by ministers. Some ministers have independent charge while others are minister of state in the Union government. Some of the ministers are included in the inner circle of the government called Cabinet.

There are 44 Cabinet Ministers⁶ in the Union government, of whom 7 are women, but only one is a Muslim woman.

Committees: Parliament at the Centre and Legislative Assemblies at the state level form advisory bodies to run their business smoothly. They are called committees. Some of them are permanent committees while others are ad hoc. At present there are about 36 Lok Sabha committees⁷ only three are headed by women and none of them is headed by a Muslim woman. Similarly, in Rajya Sabha there are at present 12 standing committees (others are joint committees), none of which is headed by a Muslim woman.

Controlling Business of the Houses: Proceedings of the Houses (Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha in Parliament and Legislative Assemblies and Legislative Councils at the state level) are controlled by the Speaker (Lower House) and Chairman (upper House). Of the 16 Lok Sabhas we never saw a Muslim woman Speaker and in Rajya Sabha no Muslim woman occupied the post of Chairman. Of the eighteen times deputy chairmen's post in Rajya Sabha saw four occasions when a Muslim woman was the incumbent⁸. Interestingly, on all these four occasions only one, Najma Heptullah, was there. There are many inferences drawn of Muslim women as stereotype, but most of the time they have challenged their stereotyped image and proved their ability. They have also contested elections as independent candidates.

After the six Lok Sabhas, statistics shows that very often Muslim women contested on their own and their affiliation with parties was insignificant, especially with the major parties.

Table 2 : Muslim Women's Party Affiliation

Lok Sabha	Muslim Women Contested	Independents Muslim women
7 th	9	6
8 th	7	5
9 th	11	09
10 th	14	06

11 th	37	32
12 th	15	09
13 th	26	11
14 th	21	06

Table 3: Other Women's Party Affiliation

Lok Sabha	Total No. Of Women Contested	Women Contestants from Political Parties	No. of Women Elected	No. of Women Elected from Political Parties
6 th	70	41	19	17
7 th	143	77	28	27
8 th	162	63	42	39
9 th	198	87	29	26
10 th	314	N.A	44	N.A
11 th	599	125	40	36
12 th	274	107	43	31
13 th	284	104	49	35
14 th	355	110	50	30

Courtesy: http://rajyasabha.nic.in/rsnew/publication_electronic/reserv_women_pers2008.pdf
(Election Commission of India)

The above statistics indicate Muslim women are not backward, but marginalised in politics.

The reality is that most of the parties do not push them towards power. Even those who are demanding reservation within the reservation system do feel hesitant towards their candidature. Parties live on Muslim vote, die for Muslim vote, but shy away from making them visible in their party. This is evident from data which show that since independence not more than three candidates were fielded by any party at one time. And that, too, on very few occasions. Though Congress and Bharatiya Janta Party are the largest national parties their Muslim woman affiliation is negligible.

Conclusion: It is a popular fallacy that Muslim women are orthodox and socially backward, economically deprived and culturally underprivileged. But why are they so? Who stereotyped them? Surely, it cannot be their religion, because Islam is the most liberal religion and it has provided equal rights to women. Women also have shed their stereotyped role and have shown their calibre whenever they have been provided with responsibility.

But It seems some factors are mainly responsible, including the patriarchal heritage and mentality of political leaders. Constitutionally, they have as much rights as men in decision-making process, but on the ground it is merely symbolic. In reality, they are continuously affected by the decisions made by others, who are male. Lastly, they are

at a disadvantage in the world-system tradition, macro factors such as trade networks, foreign direct investment, national debt, and GDP⁹.

These analyses shed considerable light on the processes as that produce and reproduce inequalities. Though these macro factors are important indicators of dependency and relative global influence of nations, but obscure the gendered character of organisation¹⁰. These macro-structural factors include those activities which are typically men and male-oriented, while the activities of women are neglected¹¹.

Thus it would not be wrong to say that the pace at which we are moving, Muslim women will be able to bridge this gap in politics in many decades.

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