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GCRP India Newsletter

Indian Elections 2009: Women in Lok Sabha by Dr Carole Spary

More women MPs than ever before have been elected to the lower house of the Indian national parliament in the 2009 general election. A total of 58 women have been elected meaning that the proportion of women MPs in the Lok Sabha (House of the People) has finally surpassed a threshold of 10 per cent. Despite this achievement, there is still reason to be cautious about what the 2009 election signified for women's political participation as candidates and elected MPs. Overall, women candidates did not increase as a pro-

portion of total candidates from the last general election in 2004. The nomination of women candidates was also uneven across parties and across states.

As always in the world's largest democracy, the Indian general election was a mammoth exercise. Taking place across 543 parliamentary constituencies in 35 states and union territories, the election was conducted in five phases across the country. Polling began on 16th April and finished on 13th May. Counting took place on 16th May and the result was declared soon after. The incumbent government, albeit with significant changes to the makeup



of coalition partners, was re-elected to office. The overall turnout was estimated to be around 60 per cent of the electorate, varying from place to place. The new parliament was constituted on 2nd June. A total of 37 parties had at least one candidate elected to parliament.

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“Women cross the 10 percent threshold in the Lok Sabha...”

...but still not enough candidates

The 2009 election proved to be interesting in the context of the debate on women's political representation. Despite the rhetorical commitment from a significant number of parties to increasing opportunities for women's political participation, the same political parties failed to increase women's nomination as candidates, when compared with the previous election in 2004. Women candidates constituted only 7 per cent of all candidates, or 556 women out of a total of 8070 candidates. Compared to the last general

election in 2004, this represents a large increase in numbers (355 women contested in 2004), but actually a very small decline in the *proportion* of women candidates relative to the total number of candidates (from 7.0 per cent to 6.9 per cent). In other words, while more women have contested in 2009 compared to 2004, the overall number of candidates is also larger, meaning the *proportion* of women candidates has stayed relatively the same. The two main national parties and rival coalition leaders nominated similar levels of women candidates. The

“Who were the women elected?”



Motorist passing parliament, taken from Raisina Road.

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) nominated 44 women, while the Congress party (INC) nominated 43 women, both representing around 10 per cent of the respective parties' total candidates. This represented a slight rise for the BJP but a slight decrease for the Congress Party, although this relative change varied from state to state. The communist parties did not do as well in their nomination of women candidates,

with around 7 per cent women candidates each. Women candidates represented only 5 per cent of candidates from the *Bahujan Samaj Party*, a party which rose to prominence in the 1990s representing the Dalit (untouchable caste) community. This low nomination of women candidates raises interesting questions around intersections of caste-based and gender-based inequality issues and their relative prominence

Profiling Women MPs

From Profiling Women MPs to the First Woman Speaker....

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Indian flag flown outside of Parliament.

in party political agendas. Among India's regional parties, some of whom have become important coalition partners at the national level, the proportion of women nominated varied extensively. Among the major contenders, this ranged from 36 per cent to zero. Data on independent candidates appear to confirm the trend that women are far less likely to contest and to win on an independent basis without formal party support - while more than a third of women candidates ran as independents in 2009 (none of whom were elected), nearly half of all men candidates ran as independents. Only nine of more than 3600 men independent candidates were elected, some of whom had outside party support.

Profiling Women MPs

Who were the women elected? And what kind of political experience do they have? Consistent with overall results, the highest number of women elected was from the Congress Party, with 23 women elected in total, making up 11 per cent of all Congress MPs elected, and 40 per cent of all women MPs. The proportion of women elected from the BJP party was the same (11 per cent), but numbered only 13 overall. But together, women MPs from the BJP and the INC make up nearly two thirds of all women MPs in the new parliament. Smaller parties and regional parties varied in the extent to which women MPs were successful, with some representing

the lone woman MP from their party. Of the 37 parties now represented in parliament, two thirds (25) have no women members. With regards to reserved seats for Scheduled Castes (*dalits*), women's presence among these seats is relatively higher than for unreserved seats, occupying 12 of the 84 reserved seats, or 14 per cent, compared to only 10 per cent overall.

Among reserved seats for Scheduled Tribes, women's presence in these seats is more representative of their proportion in the house overall. Regionally, women's presence also varied with very few women elected from the South (with the exception of Andhra Pradesh) despite high indicators of women's status in this region. For instance, Kerala, considered the most women-friendly state, saw no women elected to the lower house from that state. Few women were also elected from the North East, continuing a trend from this region.

The incumbency factor

Of the 47 women incumbents that were either elected in 2004, or elected subsequently in bye-elections, nearly three quarters (31) of these women re-contested the 2009 election. Several women incumbents did not contest either because they were not re-nominated by their party to contest in 2009 or because they had successfully contested state level elections and had resigned their seat in the national parliament. Over half of the women incumbents (16) who did contest the general election were re-elected. This incumbency rate of around 33 per cent appears to be either representative of members as a whole or higher. Overall, the majority of the members of the recently-elected parliament are new MPs (at least new to the lower house, but not necessarily new to electoral politics) – an estimate by the training bureau of the parliament put the figure at around 60 per cent. This means the remainder (around 40 per cent) of members elected in 2009 had previous experience in the Lok Sabha but were not necessarily incumbents from the 2004 election, and thus the incumbency rate would be even lower than 40 per cent.

First Woman Speaker

A significant highlight of the 2009 election was that for the first time, a woman member of parliament, Meira Kumar, was elected as Speaker of the Lok Sabha on 3rd June 2009. Kumar, a *dalit* woman Congress MP from the

state of Bihar and daughter of late politician and freedom fighter Jagjivan Ram, was suggested by ruling majority party, the Congress Party. Kumar served as a minister under the last government and was a diplomat in the Foreign Service before she entered politics. Her status as a dalit woman is perhaps less remarkable given her already elite background.

Other senior women MPs will also play leading roles in the parliament. Eight out of the 58 women elected have been appointed to minister status in the new government. In the new cabinet specifically, out of a total of 33 MPs appointed as Ministers with Cabinet rank, three were women. Senior BJP party leader and member of parliament Sushma Swaraj has been appointed as Deputy Leader of the Opposition and Sonia Gandhi, as Chairperson of the ruling coalition, sits on the treasury bench. Two women MPs, Sumitra Mahajan from the opposition party and Dr Girija Vyas from the ruling party are also sitting on the panel of chairpersons, taking turns to preside over proceedings in the absence of the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker.



National Emblem of India.

Field Work Picture Gallery

An Imperial Landscape: Rashtrapati Bhavan (President's House) taken from Raisina Hill



Parliament House security blockades: 'Dhanyavad' (Thank you) and 'Sansad Bhavan' (Parliament House)

'From our Delhi correspondent': CNN-IBN journalist preparing for broadcast with North and South Block (government secretariat) in the backdrop



An architectural afterthought: an obscured view of parliament house from Raisina Hill



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