



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Democracy and Women Representation in Indian Politics: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

As India is the largest democracy in the world with 1.3 billion people, women constitute half of its population. Regardless of caste, class, religion, region and sex all participate in the regular election of the country that conducted by Election Commission of India, an independent institution. The democracy stands for equality in all spheres, more significantly at political level. Despite being a vibrant democracy equal representation of women in Indian politics has not been given due share as compared to their counterparts. The objective of the paper is to examine women's struggle for political rights and representation in both pre-independence and post-independence India. The study includes what are the major obstacles women faces when entering politics and their role in the legislative process and policy-making. Lastly, the paper try to find out whether the Indian parliament is moving towards women friendly polity as gender equality and gender justice are the key ingredient of a vibrant democracy.

Key Words: Democracy, Gender Equality, Gender Justice, Political Rights, Representation,

Introduction

Simone De Beauvoir is rightly known for stating: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.' Historically, the very idea of democracy and representation was designed in such a way that barred women from political privileges as Aristotle said, "that merit alone confers a special claim to special privileges" (Manon Tremblay 2007: 1, Stawell. F. Melian. 1907: 329-36). When the idea of democracy came into the modern world, many underprivileged groups including women demanded equal political enfranchisement. The 20th century witnessed the struggle for gender parity movement led by women. In the 21st century the suffragette struggle continued

and it led to the establishment of the constitutional democracy across the world. As a result, equal representation of women in the national politics has emerged as one of the central issues among policy-makers and feminists. The empowerment of women and gender equality are crucial to democracy. Democracy is not only about citizenship rights and political participation and equal representation but also about the system of political parties, free and fair elections, and checks and balances of power. Equally democracy is determined by the form of institutions, where all social groups able to participate in these institutions. These power structures and institutions have been important factors that determine women's status in society (Negrustueva Galina 2000:125).

Traditionally, politics is primarily an affair of men in every society and women's primary roles revolved around motherhood and managing a household. (Lester W. Milbrath, Goel 1977: 48). According to Melissa Williams, the aim of political representations in national politics is to fight against the systemic discrimination on women. (Williams, M. S. 1998:1). According to feminist movements as well as feminist theory the under-representation of women and other categories in political institutions questions the legitimacy of the very democratic institutions (Dahlerup Drude 2006: 4). Equal Participation is a transformative action which enables individuals or groups to change the balance of power in social, economic and political relations in society (Sundar Ram D 2009: xv).

In 1917, many politically conscious women in India have raised the issues related to universal adult franchise. Majority of Indian women were debarred from voting rights due to the enforcement of strict criteria by the colonial administration. As a result, the struggle for voting rights led by women in India continued till the Act enacted in 1935 which is known as Government of India Act 1935. Finally in 1950 the Indian Constitution was came into existence and it granted voting rights to all its citizens irrespective of religion, race, caste, sex, nativity, colour and creed. Over the years, the percentage of women as voters has increased considerably, but their political participation as a representative is not equal to men. However, it is viewed that India is an evolving democracy, where slowly woman are attaining political empowerment through participation in the political processes and institutions (Sangita Dhal and Bidyut Chakrabarty 2018:60).

Conceptual Framework

India is the largest democracy and a role model for the world. The preamble of the constitution enshrines the ideals of equality, liberty and justice making the Indian women feels secure with promises of equal treatment and gender justice. In contrasts, discrimination against women and girl children continue to persist in India. In other words, the constitutional guarantee and actual reality presents a paradoxical picture of women's status in India. The indicators of status of women in society are considered to be their political participation and equal representation in decision-making institutions. India is a thriving democracy and it represents people from diverse backgrounds. There has been a remarkable increase in women voters' turnout and election campaigning among women in India and a growing number of women are entering into politics. However, the history of

electoral representation in India shows us that the proportion of women representation, particularly at the national legislature has been low as compared to the total strength of the parliament. A gender gap is increasingly seen at the level of contestation, political parties, and allocation of ministerial portfolios. Thus, enhanced role of women in politics is considered to be major factor for gender equality. Political equality is not only the right to vote but also the right to have access to the formal institutionalized centres of power (Subramaniam Ananthaxmi 1998: 39-40).

Political Participation and Representation: A Concept

The crux of democracy is people are treated equally and so equal political representation. The success and effectiveness of democracy purely depend on the participation of all its citizens without any discrimination. Political participation refers to an activity by which citizens are able to influence the decision-making process of the government (Huntington S.P and Nelson J.M: 4) It means not only exercising the right to vote, but also power sharing, decision making, policy making at all levels of governance of the state (Singh J.P 2000: 619). William R. Schonfeld has very lucidly articulated and provides ten types of political activities such as (i) running for or holding public (or party) office, (2) belonging to a party or other political organization, (3) working in an election, (4) attending political meetings or rallies, (5) making a financial contribution to a party or a candidate, (6) contacting a public official, (7) publicly expressing a political opinion to convince others, (8) partaking in political discussion, (9) voting, and (10) exposing oneself to political stimuli (Schonfeld William R. 1975:136-137). These enables the citizens to participate actively in the political input process, which help in political decision-making (Almond, G.A. Verba S 1972: 161). At the same time, such involvement has to do with rapid increase in the volume and intensity of demands for a share by various groups and strata in the society (Almond, G.A. Verba S 1972: 35-36). Women comprise about half of the population and they deserve a due share in this process. According to Karam and Lovenduski' "men are known to behave differently when women are absent. Because it upsets gender boundaries, the presence of even one woman will alter male behavior; the presence of several women will alter it even further" (Karam and Lovenduski's (1998:189). In Indian context, it is a vibrant democracy with more than 910 million voters and over the years India has produced some of the most powerful women leaders in the world. However, as compared to men, women are under-represented in Indian politics and marginalized at the decision-making process. The reservation of 33 percent seats for women in the three-tier Panchayat Raj Institutions is a success story (Sohini Mookherjee and Arindam Banerjee 2018). Similar reservation system is needed in the national legislature for the advancement of women.

Women's Suffrage movement in India

In pre-independence India, under the leadership of Annie Besant, the Irish theosophist, many women in India had joined in the Home Rule League. Margaret E. Cousins, a suffragette-cum-theosophist had organized the first franchise delegation to meet E.S. Montague and Lord Chelmsford on constitutional reform in 1917 (Devi Syamala D. 1994: 411). Out of eleven delegation members, the prominent members were Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Herabai Tata and others. The unequivocal demand was voting rights for women. The Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1917 passed a resolution in favour of granting the voting right to the women. The constitutional reform did not mention about women's voting rights in 1919 (Devi Syamala 1994: 411). The argument in favour of voting right was that as voters and as representatives, women could help the progress of social reform and making politics more moral and the world more peaceful (Lama-Rewal Stephanie Tawa:1436). The dominant role played by the 'middle class' educated women in India (Barbara Southand. 1993: 397-399).

The Government of India Act 1919 granted to limited voting rights and encumbered by qualifications like wifehood, literacy, property ownership and wifehood. However, a very narrow segment of Indian women were privileged to have such rights. Owing to the property qualification for voting was discouraging because at that time very few women were able to hold property in their own name. As a result, the number of women voter was roughly six out of every one thousand (Khera P. N. 1941:544). In other words, a large number of populations being poor were excluded from the franchise and only few rich enjoyed the voting rights. Only 12 percent population was privileged to have voting rights as they were literates and majority women in India had never had the same right to vote (Sridharan E. 2001: 14-15). In provincial elections, one third of the people in British India had the right to vote. The vote to central legislature was even more restricted, with ninety per cent of the people having no rights at all (Sridharan E. 2001: 14-15). Women were granted the right to elect the members of the provincial councils in Madras and Bombay in 1921, the United Provinces in 1923, Punjab and Bengal in 1926 and the central provinces, Bihar, Assam, and Orissa in 1930 (Barbara Southand. 1993: 397-399). In support of women rights in 1929 Mahatma Gandhi said: "Women must have votes and an equal legal status, but the problem does not end here. It only commence at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nations". The Karachi Session of the INC in 1931 had also supported unequivocally to the political equality of women without any bias. Sarojini Naidu represented Indian women in the second round table conference in 1931 and made some substantial demands which were supported by congress. The demands were: equal political status to women; full adult franchise; no reservation of seats, no nomination or co-option; no sex discrimination either against or in favour of women (Khera P. N. 1941:544). From 1927 to 1935 there was a tough negotiation between the British government and different groups in India such as Muslims, the depressed classes, and women to ensure their political representation.

Finally, with certain changes and modifications the franchise has been provided to every woman in India over 21 years of age by the 1935 Act but it was still limited. The qualifications for electors are based on property ownership or marriage to propertied men (own property, wives and widow of men with property qualification, pensioned widows and mother of military men or police officer), and literacy. In other words, literate and married women of 21 years and above were eligible for voting right, if they fulfill the same property and taxation criteria as men (Khera P. N. 1941:544). Earlier, the proportion was 1 woman to 20 men now the proportion became 1 woman to 5 men in an electorate of 35 million voters (Singh Ujjwal Kumar and Roy Anupama 2019: 65). In the absence of ownership rights and widespread illiteracy, only a small percentage of women constituted the electorate. The Act enfranchised 6 million women and 29 million men (Singh Ujjwal Kumar and Roy Anupama 2019: 65). In 1950, under the constitution of India every adult of India was granted right to vote without any discrimination.

Constitutional Provisions for Women in India

The constitution of India guaranteed equality liberty and justice under various provisions. There are several articles in the Indian Constitution which safeguards the women's interests. Article 325 and 326 guarantees political equality and right to participate in politics. Article 14 provides equality before law. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex and place of birth. Article 15 (Clause 3) gives powers to the legislature to create special provisions for women and children. Article 16 provides for equality of opportunity for all citizens in relation to employment or appointment to an office under the State. Article 39 (a) states that the State shall direct its policy towards securing equally to men and women the right to have an adequate means of livelihood. Article 39 (d) provides the State to direct its policy towards securing equal pay for equal work for both men and women. Article 42 provides for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. Article 51(A) (e) provides the fundamental duty of citizens to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act provides 33 percent reservation for women in the three-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions under different provisions such as 243-(D) (2) and clause (1), Article 243-(D) (3), Article 243-(D) (4).

Women's Representation in the Parliament

India has the distinction of having had a woman Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers, Chief Ministers, President of India and Governors, Speakers, Leader of Opposition at the national and state level. However, only a very few women enter into mainstream politics in India either the support of influential families or through power of wealth (Kondreddy Madhavi Lakshmi 2000:33). Largely they form part of the syndrome of exclusion from political power. Thus, as a female voter appears to be blind party loyalists. The impediments to women's equal participation in politics are rooted in socio-cultural patterns of living, patriarchal political structure, lack of awareness and knowledge of electoral politics, lack of family support and poor allotment rates of seats to women by parties and increasingly competitive nature of politics affects in contesting and winning in election

(Gail Omvedt 2005: 4746; Rai 2011:50). As a result, a gender gap is witnessed at all level including in party ticket distribution contestation, and allocation of ministerial portfolios and other decision-making bodies. Several influential women contest as independent candidates in the election, after being denied party ticket to them. Their position remains weak as the entire power struggle is operated through parties (Kaushik Susheela 1993: 63-64). At the same time, the voting behaviour and attitude towards women is also not favourable as compared to their male counterparts. Political parties have their own electoral manifestos and agenda where they promise for the welfare of women. For example, the major political parties in India promised to provide 33 percent reservation for women in the parliament and introduced the Bill in 1996 and till now the Bill is pending. The promotion of women in politics through political reservations threatens the position of power of men. If women's reservation is implemented almost 33 percent of male members might lose their seats (Madhu Kishwar 1996:2872-73).

Table 1 reveals the total representation of women in various Lok Sabha in India. The number of women contesting in election has always been low since the first election in India. The data shows steady increase of women representation from twelfth Lok Sabha election onwards to the present Lok Sabha. The total percentage in the Lok Sabha has increased from 4.50 percent in 1952 to 11.42 percent in 2014 and 14.39 percent in 2019. The seventeenth Lok Sabha has 78 women Members of Parliament as against 62 in the sixteenth Lok Sabha. The data also reveals the poor representation of women at the level of contestation. In the seventieth Lok Sabha Elections, out of the total numbers of contestants of 8,049, only 724 were women. In the eleventh Lok Sabha the total number of male contestants was 13,353 whereas female contestants were just 599. In 2014, there were 636 women contestants. The number of male contestants has always been in thousand while the number of women contestants has always been low. The number of women participating in the general elections has been increasing over the years but the affair of politics continue to dominate by men and it led to under-representation women despite women voters form half the electorate in the country. Chart 1 also clearly reveals the under-representation of women in Indian politics. Women leaders account for just 14.39 percent of the 542 parliamentarians, while almost 86 percent of seats are being represented by men. Ironically, 78 women parliamentarian are elected in the seventeenth Lok Sabha which is the highest number in the history of the parliamentary democracy in India.

Table 1: Representation of women in various Lok Sabha 1952-2019

Lok Sabha Election	Year	Number of seats available for election	Total number of Contestants	No. of Male Contested	No. of Female contested	No. of Women members elected	% of Women in Lok Sabha
First	1952	489	1874	1831	43	22	4.50
Second	1957	494	1518	1473	45	27	5.47
Third	1962	494	1985	1915	70	34	6.88
Fourth	1967	523	2369	2302	67	31	5.93
Fifth	1971	521	2784	2698	86	22	4.22
Sixth	1977	544	2439	2369	70	19	3.49
Seventh	1980	544	4620	4478	142	28	5.15
Eight	1984	544	5574	5406	164	44	8.09
Ninth	1989	529	6160	5962	198	28	5.29
Tenth	1991	509	8699	8374	325	36	7.07
Eleventh	1996	543	13952	13353	599	40	7.37
Twelfth	1998	543	4750	4476	274	44	8.10
Thirteenth	1999	543	4254	3976	278	44	8.10
Fourteenth	2004	543	5435	5080	355	47	8.66
Fifteenth	2009	543	8070	2514	556	59	10.87
Sixteenth	2014	543	8163	7527	636	62	11.42
Seventeenth	2019	542	8049	7325	724	78	14.39

Source: Election Commission of India 2019 and 2014 and Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India 2017.

Chart 1: Male and Female Members of Parliament Winning Trends 1952-2019

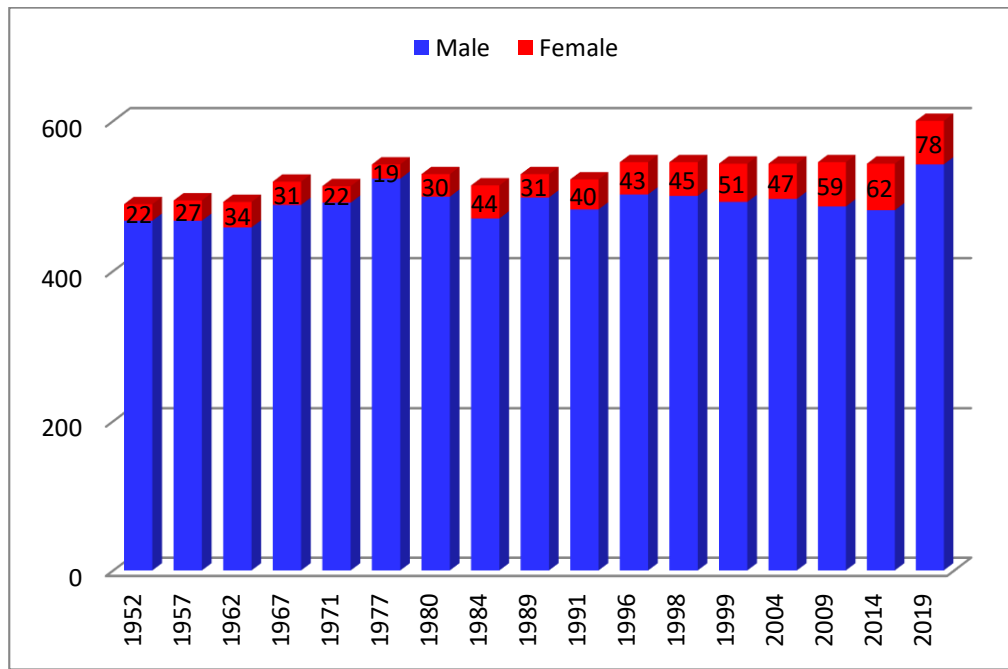


Table 2: State-Wise Women Elected to 17th and 16th Lok Sabha

Name of the State/UTs	Total No. of Seats	17 th Lok Sabha Total Elected Women	16 th Lok Sabha Total Elected Women
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	1	0	-
Andhra Pradesh	25	4	2
Arunachal Pradesh	1	0	-
Assam	14	1	2
Bihar	40	3	3
Chandigarh	1	1	1
Chhattisgarh	11	3	1
Dadar & Nagar Haveli	1	0	-
Daman & Diu	1	0	-
Delhi	7	1	-
Goa	2	0	0
Gujarat	26	6	5
Haryana	10	1	0
Himachal Pradesh	4	0	0
Jammu & Kashmir	6	0	0
Jharkhand	14	2	0
Karnataka	28	2	1
Kerala	20	1	1
Lakshadweep	1	0	0
Madhya Pradesh	29	4	5
Maharashtra	48	8	6
Manipur	2	0	-
Meghalaya	2	1	0
Mizoram	1	0	-
Nagaland	1	0	0
Odisha	21	7	3
Pudducherry	1	0	0
Punjab	13	2	1
Rajasthan	25	3	1
Sikkim	1	0	-
Tamil Nadu	39	3	4
Telangana	17	1	1
Tripura	2	1	0
Uttar Pradesh	80	11	12
Uttarakhand	5	1	1
West Bengal	42	11	12
All India	542	78	62

Sources: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementations, Women & Men in India 2017 and 2020, (17th 16th Lok Sabha Election).

Table 2 shows total 78 women have been elected to the seventieth Lok Sabha. Among the States wise representation, Uttar Pradesh has elected 11 women Members of Parliament and West Bengal has also elected 11 women candidates. Maharashtra elected 8 and Odisha 7 and Gujarat 6 women in the seventieth Lok Sabha. Delhi, Haryana, Meghalaya, Kerala, Telengana, Tripura, and Uttarakhand have one seat each. 9 States have no women representation in the Lok Sabha. In sixteenth Lok Sabha 62 women have been elected to Lok Sabha out of the total seats of 543. Uttar Pradesh has elected 12 women Members of Parliament which was the highest number of elected women in the sixteenth Lok Sabha. West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh have elected 7 and 6 women respectively. Only 7 States has one women representative to the sixteenth Lok Sabha and in many states, women do not have any representation in the Lok Sabha in 2014 as well.

Among the political parties, in 2019 Lok Sabha election, the Bharatiya Janata Party, Indian National Congress and All India Trinamool Congress had fielded 45, 47 and 17 women respectively. 41 women candidates have been elected by the BJP and 9 women candidates elected by the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC). Congress party has managed to elect 6 women candidates and 22 women candidates elected by other parties. In 2014, BJP fielded 38 women and Congress fielded 60 women. The BJP has won 30 seats while congress party won 4 seats out of 44 seats. The Trinamool Congress won 11 women seats and 18 women elected by other parties. Although the present Lok Sabha has the largest number of women in the history of Indian election but as far as gender representation at the party level is concerned the parties have to be more flexible in accommodating women in national politics. The presence of more women members in the parliament means more issues can be raised by the women parliamentarians.

Participation in the Decision-Making

India has witnessed a glorious history of women's participation in public life since its independence. They participate as a voter, an elected representative and also as a decision-maker in our parliamentary democracy. Women leaders also equally participate in the debates and discussions on various issues including Budget, Motions and Resolutions and even raise issues of national and international importance in the floor of the house and present their view points. Some of the well-known women parliamentarians of both the houses are Smt. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur (16 August 1947-16 April 1957), Smt. Violet Alva (1962-1969), Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (9 June 1964-31 October 1984), (Sucheta Kripalani (1967-1971), Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (1967-1971), Dr. Najma Heptulla (1985-1998), and Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil (1986-1988), Ms. Jayalalitha (1984-1989) (Rajya Sabha Secretariat 2003: 83-85). A wide array of issues raised by them are include providing compulsory primary education, healthcare, food and nutritional security, mid-day meals in schools, women and children's welfare, better working condition for women employee, dowry prohibition and even on defence policy etc. In the sixteenth Lok Sabha sessions women Member of Parliaments asked 292 questions and participated in 57 debates (PRS Legislative Research: 2019). In addition to this, the new generation leaders are Sushma Swaraj Sonia Gandhi, Sumitra Mahajan, and Smt. Margaret Alva and the women leaders in the house after 90s' have also enriched the dignity of house. Many of the women parliamentarians come from a highly educated and

distinguished background and dedicated their lives for the betterment of the poor and weaker section of the society.

Parliamentary Initiatives of Women Members on Gender Sensitive Social Legislation

Several gender sensitive social legislation Bills were introduced by socially conscious women Members of Parliament in the first Lok Sabha itself. Notable among them were: the Dowry Prohibitions Bill, the Hindu Marriage Bill, the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls' Act, Women's and Children's Institutions (Licensing) Act and Indian Adoption of Children Bill. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, as health minister, introduced many important Government bills (Devi Syamala 1994: 411). Due to the sheer effort of women leaders some of the most important legislation has been passed. These include Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique Act 1994, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005, Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, Protection Against Domestic Violence, 2005, Amendment to Hindu Succession Act, 2005, Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal Act), 2013 and National Food Security Act, 2013. Their leadership and progressive thinking led to bringing out major transformation of Indian society. Moreover, women leaders have kept alive the old unresolved gender issues and also started raising new issues such women's rights, child labour, human rights, ecology. The long-term goal is to challenge the very existence of patriarchal political structure and bring out change in the economy, polity and society.

Conclusion

The country chose the path of democracy with universal adult franchise and the value of political equality is central to democracy which is guaranteed by the constitution of India. During the couple of years there has been a rise in female contestants in elections and their success rates have also consistently been higher than male contestants. At the same time, women's vote share in India has also been increased significantly, but women have not been given equal share in the national politics and still largely dominated by men. The analysis of women's representation in parliament reflects that India has not yet converted into greater representation of women at the national level. At the same time, According to United Nations' Gender Inequality Index 2019, India's rank is 122 out of 189 countries, which is lower than several neighbouring countries in the region.

In a substantive democracy political will, restructuring power relation and inclusive development are considered to be significant instruments of the social transformation. A growing number of countries have been introducing gender quotas in their national legislature. In the last two decades around seventeen countries have made law related to reservation of seats for women candidates, and forty four countries have legislated quotas for women candidates in political party lists. This policy has improved women's representation at the global level upto 22 percent. On the other hand, in India there are only 14.39 percent of current parliamentarians are women.

In 1996, the Deve Gowda government has introduced the 33 percent reservation for women in the Parliament and State Assemblies. Bills have been introduced thrice in the house and lapsed with the dissolution of their respective Lok Sabhas before in the late 90's. The aim of the Bill was to reserve one-third of all seats for women in the Lok Sabha and the state legislative assemblies (PRS Legislative Research). More than two decades passed, yet no consensus has emerged on the women reservation bill. Some political parties are in favour of 33 percent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and the State legislatures. While some others parties do not agree with it and demands 33 percent reservation within this reservation for the women belonging to backward sections of the society. In 2019 Odisha and West Bengal Government passed the reservation Bill that helped women to get 33 percent reservation in State assemblies. The same act is required at the national level. Above all, constant pressure from women groups at various levels is necessary and crucial in order to ensure equal gender representation as democratic rights as well as to strengthen the democratic fabric of India.

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