

INDIAN POLITICS NEEDS A DOSE OF NEW EXPERIMENTALISM

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In early 2021, Republican Deb Haaland became the first Native American Cabinet Secretary in the U.S. Department of the Interior. This department, once infamous for facilitating the genocide of Native Americans, now oversees 500 million acres of public land, along with controlling the Bureau of Indian Affairs (responsible for the welfare of 1.9 million Native Americans). History, in some ways, has come full circle, with change in a department that was set up to disenfranchise Native Americans.

On September 20, 2022, the United States House of Representatives witnessed the swearing in of Rep. Mary Peltola, a native Alaskan. Other democracies have offered space to driven individuals to emerge as leaders from native tribes and indigenous movements. In 2006, the election of Hilaria Supa Huaman to Peru's Congress allowed her to openly critique the impact of colonialism on native tribes in Peru and the Peruvian government's programme to forcibly sterilise indigenous women, as well as push for preserving the native culture in the Andes. Similarly, in Bolivia, Evo Morales, as the first indigenous President, was able to push for political autonomy for indigenous groups, in their ancestral territories.

India notably has a woman President who hails from a tribal community even as representation in parliamentary committees is often lacking, with less than 59.5% of all SC/ST lawmakers represented primarily in the Social Justice Committee. There are few political parties that have SC/ST individuals as a part of their leadership. The anti-defection law (Fifty Second Amendment Act, 1985 with a further amendment, the Constitution (Ninety-First Amendment) Act) must be reviewed as it prevents SC/ST lawmakers from speaking up in Parliament, particularly on issues where the party stance differs from their individual choices. Opportunities to highlight injustice against their community are often rare, and linked to the lottery system for the Zero Hour Q&A time. The participation of ST individuals remains largely symbolic.

Meanwhile, older democracies are increasingly encouraging female participation. In June 2018, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez beat Joe Crowley (a 10-term Congressional incumbent for New York's 14th Congressional District) in the Democratic Party's primary elections before going on to beat her Republican opponent, Anthony Pappas, in November 2018. At 29, she became the youngest

woman to serve in the United State House of Representatives. In Finland, a population with an average age of 43, and below-replacement fertility rates), Sanna Marin became the youngest Prime Minister at 34 in 2019. It was not a one-off, her coalition government having been formed with five parties, all of whom had female party leaders. In Finland, having women in powerful roles has been normalised. Under Justin Trudeau, Canada has seen a cabinet that is 50% female. Meanwhile, in India, in the Gujarat elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress nominated only a handful of women candidates. We often hear about cross-party support for the Women's Reservation Bill that seeks to reserve a third of all seats in the Lok Sabha for women. Yet, the Bill continues to remain in limbo.

There are some democracies that have also pushed to engage with youth. In Austria, in 2017, Sebastian Kurz was appointed Chancellor at 31. Italy saw Luigi DiMaio serving as the deputy Prime Minister at the age of 31 (2018-19). France's Typhanie Degois, a law student, was elected to France's Parliament at the age of 24 in 2017. In 2013, and at 29, Naisula Lesuuda became the youngest serving Kenyan Senator. In Spain, in 2015, Nagua Alba was elected to its parliament in 2015; incidentally, she was also Spain's first Member of Parliament of Arab descent. Meanwhile, between 1999 and 2019, the average age of Lok Sabha MPs was above 50, rising from 52 in 1999 to 59 in 2014 —it has declined a bit since then. Most political parties are increasingly fielding older candidates in elections to the Lok Sabha. India is increasingly a gerontocracy, apparently representing the aspirations of its youth. A range of policy measures could be evaluated to enhance youth participation in politics; examples include pushing for youth quotas in select seats, to making inner party democracy mandatory, along with a push for proportional representation. And yet, apathy prevails, prompting one to ask why Indian citizens acquiesce in this.

Long-established democracies have also created an encouraging environment in politics for atypical individuals with non-normative sexuality. Examples are Iceland (Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir), Ireland (Leo Varadkar) and Belgium (Ellie Di Rupo). In Africa, South Africa, Tunisia and Mauritius have seen LGBTQ+ individuals get elected or nominated to positions such as High Court judge, a provincial premier, or even a leader of a political party. There are also examples in Asia (Sri Lankan Member of Parliament, Mangala Samaraweera and Governor Niluka Ekanayake. India too has seen small steps being taken in ensuring political representation for the LGBTQ+ community, Shabnam Mausi and Madhu Bai Kinnar being examples. But such cases are few and far between, with atypical sexual or gender orientation often considered a career stopper in politics. Systematic disenfranchisement seems to be routine. In an ideal polity, LGBTQ issues would be dealt with by the Department of Social Justice and Empowerment, along with the creation of employment support groups.

Beyond this, most mature democracies also see a greater diversity of ideology while offering representation to different socio-economic groups such as trade unions and farmers. Libertarianism, a political philosophy that advocates economic liberty and a small state, with limited regulation, has many adherents across democracies (for e.g., the Reason Party in Australia, the New Party in Brazil, the Dawn of Liberty Party in South Korea, and the Libertarian Party in the United States). Similarly, green politics has been embraced across the world (the Green Party in the U.S. and the Alliance 90/The Greens in Germany are examples). Despite being the largest democracy, most Indian political parties are typically centre-left and populist — ideology is typically not a dividing factor. The Republican Party of India established by B.R. Ambedkar in September 1956, has since shrunk. Meanwhile, while less than 37.24% of Indian MPs claim to be "agriculturists", only 7.15% listed their occupation as "farmers", prompting the question why there is so little parliamentary debate on issues concerning Indian farmers. Do we have adequate political representation to represent different views (e.g. on the coastal fishing community, environmental issues, etc.)?

Indian democracy seems to be stuck in a hard place as the middle class and professionals have by and large seceded from politics. While other countries offer pathways in politics to individuals from varied backgrounds, Indian politics continues to be constrained by nepotism. We need a push for new experimentalism in politics, with greater representation and views from all sections of society. Without a push for greater diversity, India's democracy will remain stunted.

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