

Women and Democracy in India

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to present how twelve women from different segments of society define democracy and how they experience democracy in their daily life. Through review of literature I wanted to learn what these women consider democracy in India to be, how they recognise democracy and rights associated with democracy in their daily lives and how they reflect upon gender equality in relation to democracy. Their opportunity to change their situation is limited. Women from the second group are active in either politics or in an organisation. They know the word democracy and their rights associated with the concept. All of these women have basic education and families supporting them in their political engagements. Family is very important in India, in all endeavours of a woman is life; education, job and whom to marry. The third group includes women with higher education, a vocational degree. They are much aware of their democratic rights, but recognise difficulties for women to claim upon them in different stages and situations of their lives. The situation of women is complex, they have the possibility to enter the public sphere, but women with careers inevitably have two jobs: the employment and the responsibility over the household. Women can enter the public sphere earlier dominated by men, but men entering the private sphere and taking part in household chores seem not to be possible in the near future.

Introduction

India is not only the largest democracy in the world, it is also considered to be a strong one, characterised by a good relationship between the electors and the elected. India is a modern state with secure boundaries, sovereign control over domestic politics and with international recognition. But India is also a quite new state; it became free from colonialists quite late in history, and is still carrying a colonial heritage, it wants to become more independent.

The economic situation in India is constantly improving and the middle class is growing. The illiteracy rate, though, is still high in India among the lower classes, and the people lacking basic education are mainly women. Undoubtedly, illiteracy and lack of education cause difficulties in obtaining information about the rights associated with a democracy. Hence, many women in India find themselves living under hard circumstances not having the time or ability to speak up for themselves. Poverty is another challenging problem which the government of India, with international help, is trying to fight. Up to one fourth of the poor in the world is estimated to live in India. Therefore reducing poverty in India is of highest interest. To strengthen women's position, the poverty issue also has to be dealt with, for the reason that these kinds of problems in India, as elsewhere, are correlated.

The purpose of the paper is to present how women from different segments of society define democracy and how they experience democracy in their daily life. How these women consider democracy in India to be, how they recognise democracy and rights associated with democracy, in their daily lives and how they reflect upon gender equality in relation to democracy

Women's Position and Situation

This aims to bring an understanding of the life of the women interviewed, the problems they face, the abilities they possess and how they recognise democracy in their daily lives. Democracy does not only imply a specific ruling system or citizen's right to vote in elections. One can claim that a democratic system should also be recognised in the everyday life, in the choices people make and how they are treated by the government and by their fellow citizens.

The situation of the women is diverse in India. By emphasising individual sayings of the women, this paper illustrates the variety of challenges the women face in different stages of their lives. Two aspects will be discussed in connection to democracy and democratic rights: women's relation to the family and to education.

Women and the Family

In India, the family's opinion is very important, regardless of the family's situation: rich or poor, high caste or low caste. It is expected that parents take an active part in a daughter's life, and a woman usually stays with her parents until she gets married. Whether or not this limits the freedom of a woman has to be considered in each individual case, dependent on the women's wish to have the parents involved in the decisions or not.

Living under the same roof inevitably means that family members have an influence on each other. By tradition the woman moves to her husband's family and their home after the wedding. Joint family households are common. One reason can be that people in India like to have their family around and another reason can be the lack of accommodation. Although, some consider the joint family households custom obsolete.

Women and Education

In India, the level of education generally differs between classes of society. One out of three still lives in what is classified to be extreme poverty and many of them are illiterate women. But many things have changed over the past decade, the economical situation has improved and the middle class has grown. Educating people is seen as the key to raising the standard of living, and strengthening the position of women. Educating women is a process to raise their voices so that they may become equal members of the society. Forbes outlines the process in the following way:

'The first generation of educated women found a voice: they wrote about their lives and about the conditions of women. The second generation acted. They articulated the needs of women, critiqued their society and the foreign rulers, and developed their own institutions.

Given the fact, that more women than men are illiterate in India, men generally speaking have better access to written information. However, receiving sufficient information is not entirely dependent on literacy and education. Most people in India have access to television and radio. During the election campaigns politicians regularly visit people in their homes, as well as speak at political mass-rallies. Even illiterate people, therefore, have access to democratic information, although they may be excluded from direct access to written information.

Decisions have been taken on a national level to increase the literacy rate in the country. According to Indian law, elementary school is compulsory for all children. But to some people, sending their children to school might not even be an option, when the survival of the family is at stake and the children have to work. Sometimes the children provide for the whole family, consequently, preventing them from work causes the family not only to choose between starving or breaking the law, it also makes education appear as a threat to the family's survival. If parents find it more profitable for their children to work and if they install this view in their children, the so called 'poverty circle' will not be broken. In order to bring about a change, their economical situation has to improve and parents need to appreciate what education can do for their children.

Women and Equality

In a country like India, a segregated society with prominent differences in class and caste, equality can be discussed from several perspectives. In this thesis, gender equality is treated as a necessary component of a democratic system. Democracy and one person n one vote is not exclusive to political elections, a person living in a democracy also has the right to express his or her opinion and make his or her own decisions, and not be subordinated anyone else.

Gender Equality

In India, the role of women is changing. A commonly held opinion is that women traditionally are tied to the private sphere. Whether or not this is still the situation is an empirical question, Marie Larsson writes, and it has to be considered in each circumstance. Nevertheless, she does recognise a general division of spheres between men and women.

Standing up for oneself is not possible for all women. Expectations on how to act as a 'good woman', daughter and wife, can be hard to challenge. Confronting the dichotomy between the roles of men and women takes a lot of courage, since it includes rules of how women should behave, not only in the private sphere but also in the public sphere. But, it is important to emphasise, women living in the same area do experience gender equality in different ways, although they at first sight seem to live under similar circumstances. The role of women, their position in the family also changes through different stages of their lives.

Women and Democracy

The life of the women interviewed was discussed, to find out how and where democracy can be recognised. It focused on the recognition and visibility of democracy in the life. In this chapter democracy is discussed as an active cause of action, for example through voting, joining a political party or a group's coming together for a special cause.

Women's Definition of Democracy and Democratic Rights

For a country to be democratic there should be a governmental system with elections on a regular basis, with the presumption: one person, one vote. But how democracy is put into practice, and in what way democracy is expressed and recognised in daily life depends on each country. There is not one single

method to implement or make democracy function everywhere, and there is not one way in how democracy is experienced or defined by the people. The concept of democracy has to be defined.

If people are not allowed to decide by themselves who to vote for, one of the core values of democracy is undermined. In India, the people I spoke with seemed to distrust politicians. They believed that bribes are offered during election campaigns, which consequently cause the wrong people to be elected. There seemed to be a common view that poor people accept bribes during the elections. The difference in education and economical situation makes it hard to fight corruption if poor people sell their votes when the need for money outweighs the free choice of voting. Moreover, regardless of whether bribes are given or taken during elections, whether the poor are victims or not, the very fact that there is a widely spread belief that politicians generally are corrupt, indicates a lack of trust in the political system.

Women and Political Participation

Besides compulsory school attendance and laws granting equal rights for sons and daughters, other measures have been put into practice to improve the situation and opportunities for women, and to raise their participation in the political life. A general opinion seems to be that only women can understand what is important for other women, and only they have the ability to fight for themselves. Allocation of quotas is a common method used to raise the number of participating women, for example, one third of the seats in parliament are set aside for women.

Joining the political arena may or may not be the choice of the woman. The family's and the husband's opinion is important for some of the women interviewed. Concluding Discussion

The purpose of the paper is to present how women from different segments of Indian society define democracy and how they experience democracy in their daily life. What these women consider democracy in India to be, how they recognise democracy and rights associated with democracy in their daily lives, and how they reflect upon gender equality in relation to democracy.

The situation in India is complex, as it is elsewhere. There are women in top political positions and women running grassroots organisations. But there are also women who have no or little knowledge about their legal rights. No one can say that all women should be discontented with their situation of living and are obliged to involve themselves in political organisations or self-help groups. But it seems evident that they ought to be aware of their democratic rights and to be able to speak their mind without fear of consequences. There were substantial differences in how the women interviewed recognised democracy in their daily lives. By dividing the women into three different groups their statements can be analysed as representative for these three groups

Expectations on women are deeply rooted: getting married, responsibility for the home and possibly a career. Political policies ensuring equal rights for sons and daughters and other measures have been taken by the Indian government. But there are still many women who feel that they are completely dependent on their husbands. There is consequently a need for women to be informed of their rights and possibilities, and to be able to use these without the threat of being excluded from their families. In many groups in the Indian society, the process has already begun with a positive result. The middle class is growing and more women are getting educated. As a result, in so far as education is correlated with higher degree of personal independence, equal rights put into practice are also improving

Education was a subject that women found interesting to discuss; everyone had something to say in the matter. I draw the conclusion that this is a subject people discuss quite often. Basic education and higher education seems to be non-optional for the women. They have to get a higher education to ensure that they will not be subordinate or dependent upon anyone. Having their own careers was very important to them.

For some women, the ones living in a slum area having a few or even no years in school, education is of vital importance. Access to necessary information and enough information to make independent choices are what we expect to find in a democracy. With a large group in the society not being able to read or write, the Indian government has an important issue to deal with. Being illiterate restricts the life of a woman in many ways, for example in her ability to gather information and in the outlook of getting a 'good' husband.

Some women are literate and have entered the public sphere through politics where they think of themselves as representing the voices of women. Women need other women in political positions to plead their cause. It is today possible for a woman to be leader of a slum area and after some time to reach a political position where she can have an even greater influence. The presumption that only a woman knows the needs of women is shared by many of the women. But the needs women have, differ depending on their position in society. Few women fight for issues such as those concerning clean water, sanitation, work possibilities, and education for everyone. In the election campaigns, they turn to voters who would fit into the first group of women, those living in slum areas, by promising to improve their situation and to meet their needs of, for example, clean water.

Many things in the daily life of women are connected through the cultural context they live in. The traditions still live strong in many areas of India. The spheres of women and men are clearly separated although they are becoming more and more questioned and challenged. Those who challenge the spheres are the women from the second and third group, women who are politically active or have a higher education, that is, those with the ability to do so.

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