

INDIA

India, the second most populous nation on earth and the world's largest parliamentary democracy, is a complex society that defies easy characterisation. It now has close to one billion people; its geographical variety embraces torrid plains and icy Himalayan heights; its history, reaching back deep into antiquity, has bequeathed a kaleidoscopic ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity.

In formal political terms, India is a republic with a semi-federal structure and a parliamentary system of government. Its constitution, promulgated in 1950, three years after the nation achieved independence from British rule, draws upon British governmental practice, but also incorporates features from France, the United States and the erstwhile Soviet Union.

The constitution established the semi-federal character of the polity by setting out a clear division of powers between the Union, or central government, and India's 25 states and seven union territories. It also laid down clear principles for the conduct of public affairs, among them a commitment to secularism and a pledge to work for equality in the face of caste hierarchy and other inegalitarian survivals from the past. The age-old practice of "untouchability", involving the ostracism, maltreatment and physical segregation of people at the lowest level of the social hierarchy, was specifically banned, and the constitution pledged special help, including affirmative action, for historically disadvantaged castes, tribes and other "socially and educationally backward classes." While women were not specifically identified as falling in this category, the spirit of the Indian Constitution is strongly egalitarian and geared to the redressal of traditional patterns of oppression.

The Constitution also sets out the institutions of democratic government, including a bicameral legislature comprising a lower house, the Lok Sabha, and an upper chamber, the Rajya Sabha. Today, the Lok Sabha has 545 members directly elected on the basis of universal adult franchise, but with a certain number of seats reserved for candidates from historically oppressed sections. Most of the 245 members of the Rajya Sabha are indirectly elected by state assemblies.

Supreme executive authority in India rests with the President, indirectly elected by the members of both Houses of Parliament and of the State Assemblies. Real executive power, however, is exercised by the Prime Minister and his or her cabinet, traditionally representing the largest political party represented in the lower house but, increasingly of late, selected by coalitions of parties functioning in a hung parliament.

The politics of the early decades of independent India were dominated by the Indian National Congress, the political party which developed out of the movement which, led by Mahatma Gandhi, had played a central role in India's anti-colonial struggle. From the Congress

came India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who governed the country from 1947 till his death in 1964. His daughter, Indira Gandhi (no relation to the Mahatma), ruled as Prime Minister from 1966-1977 and again from 1980 till her assassination in 1984. Her son, Rajiv Gandhi, then took over, winning a landslide victory in the 1984 elections and serving as Prime Minister till his defeat in the general elections of 1989. This dynastic element in the politics of independent India has attracted controversy.

Two basic trends can be discerned in the development of Indian politics since the 1960s. One has been a growing concentration of power at the centre, with a consequent weakening of state-level decision making and the rise of regional assertiveness and, in the case of Punjab, Assam and Kashmir, armed separatism. This centralising tendency was particularly associated with Indira Gandhi's premiership.

The second, related trend has been the long-term decline of the Congress Party. From its pre-eminence in the 1950s it has shrunk dramatically in national electoral terms; in the 1996 general elections, for example, it won only 136 seats in the 545-seat Lok Sabha, yielding the position of largest party to the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party, and its share of the national vote fell to an all-time low of 28 per cent. Today, Indian politics are undergoing a churning process in which no party can apparently gain a clear parliamentary majority; coalition politics seem set to continue for the foreseeable future.

As Congress has declined, other political parties have jostled to fill the vacuum. At the national level, major parties include the Janata Dal, the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Communist Party of India, and the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Important regional players include the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in the southern state of Tamil Nadu and the Telugu Desam Party (Naidu) in Andhra Pradesh. As of late 1997, India was ruled by a coalition, the National Front, which unites the Janata Dal with an assortment of regional and other smaller parties. At times, this alliance has won the external support of Congress in its bid to keep out of power the Bharatiya Janata Party, whose Hindu fundamentalist, anti-Muslim agenda is seen as a direct threat to India's secular identity.

Women in Politics

Although home to Indira Gandhi, one of the world's most determined, resilient and long-serving women leaders, and despite constitutional guarantees of equality, India has not succeeded in involving significant numbers of women in politics in a leadership capacity. Presently, only 44 women or 7.97 per cent of total membership of 552 in the Lok Sabha. At the level of the Rajya Sabha, there are only 18 women representing 7.20 per cent of the total membership of 250. In 1995, there

were only 57 women in the combined chambers of parliament, or 7.49 per cent of total membership. And while a number of women have held ministerial office – among them Margaret Alva and Sushma Swaraj, profiled below – Indian cabinets have, by and large, contained very few women. For example, the cabinet of Congress leader and Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in 1994 had only one woman out of a total of 34 members.

India's semi-federal structure and many-tiered system of local government have enabled growing numbers of women to enter politics at the sub-national level. There have been women Chief Ministers in a few states, and some state governments, for example the Left Front alliance that has held power in West Bengal since 1977, have taken specific steps to encourage women's participation in politics. Following amendments to the constitution in 1992, one third of seats in panchayats, or local councils, have been reserved for women.

Measures taken in the light of the UN decade for women, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and growing pressure from within the country to increase the political participation of women, are beginning to have an impact. New departments on women's affairs have been set up within the Ministry of Human Resources Development and an autonomous National Commission for Women has been established. In addition, women's commissions and women's corporations have been set up in most states, and women's cells have been introduced to the Planning Commission and to Ministries such as Rural Development and Labour.

In September 1996, the then Prime Minister, HD Deve Gowda, tabled a bill in the Lok Sabha to amend the Constitution to ensure that women have an exclusive claim to one third of parliamentary constituencies in general elections. Soon after taking over as Prime Minister in 1997, Inder Kumar Gujral brought four women into his Cabinet. He also pledged that his government would press ahead with legislation providing for quotas for women in national and state legislatures.

An important factor behind such developments has been the growing strength of the women's movement in India. Amendments in the criminal law relating to rape and dowry deaths, the establishment of the national commission on women, the introduction of a minimum quota for women in anti-poverty programmes, and the one third quota for women in local and national politics have come about as the result of pressure from women's organisations. Demands for equality and gender justice are now supported to a greater or lesser extent in the manifestos of all major parties and in the development planning boards of the government. The challenge for the women's movement is to build on this foundation.

MARGARET ALVA

Congress (I) Member of India's Upper House (Rajya Sabha)

Prominent activist of the Congress (I) Party

Former Union Minister of State (various portfolios)

Margaret Alva had an unusual initiation into politics: it was her husband, together with her father-in-law, at the time himself a member of parliament, who persuaded her to leave her law practice and become a politician. Thus began a colourful and varied career in parliament and in and out of ministerial office. Today, Alva – outspoken and assertive – is regarded as one of India's most seasoned and experienced woman political figures.

Early Life and Entry into Politics

Margaret Alva was born in Mangalore, a port city located in the south Indian state of Karnataka. Her family was one of Christians, a minority community in India constituting roughly 3 per cent of the population. She obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree at Mount Carmel College in Bangalore, the Karnataka state capital. She then read for a law degree at the Government Law College in the same city, emerging with an impressive list of awards.

From the start, Alva combined the practice of law with involvement in welfare organisations. She was active in the Indian arm of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), later serving as its President, and founded a non-governmental organisation, Karuna, early in her career as a lawyer.

Alva, who by this time was married to a fellow law graduate, in 1969 joined the Congress Party, the successor to the Indian National Congress of Freedom Movement days and in the late 1960s still the dominant force in Indian politics. She was encouraged to do so by her husband and by his father, who was a Congress Party Member of Parliament.

The year 1969 was a crucial one in the history of Congress. It was marked by a major split that saw Indira Gandhi seize the initiative from the party's old guard and essentially refloat the party as the Congress (Indira), or Congress (I). It was within the Karnataka state unit of the Congress (I) that Alva embarked on her political career.

Rise to the Top

Five years after joining the Congress (I), Alva was elected to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of India's national parliament in Delhi. From 1975 to 1976, she served on the executive of the Congress Parliamentary Party. This was the period of the Emergency, the controversial suspension of democratic politics and civil liberties in India, from June 1975 to March 1977, by the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi.

First elected to the Rajya Sabha in 1974, Alva was re-elected in indirect six-yearly elections held in 1980, 1986 and 1992. She developed considerable parliamentary expertise, serving on the Business Advisory Committee, the Committee on Rules, and other committees of the house.

By the mid-1980s, Alva had embarked on her ministerial career. From 1984 to 1985, she served as Union Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs. In 1985, after the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the landslide electoral victory of Rajiv Gandhi, she was appointed Union Minister of State for Youth Affairs, Sports, Women and Child Development within the Ministry of Human Resource Development. The same year, she attended the Third United Nations World Conference on Women in Nairobi, and on her return to India was instrumental in setting up women's cells within the Planning Commission and a number of ministries.

Part of her responsibility as Minister of State was to ensure that the Department of Women and Child Development monitored the implementation of the Rajiv Gandhi Government's 28-point programme for the welfare of women and children, and to report to the Prime Minister on this. She also initiated work on the preparation of a national perspective plan for women. This called for the setting up of a national development corporation for women; this idea is yet to be implemented at the national level, although some several state-level development corporations for women have been established.

Within the Congress (I), Alva took the initiative in proposing that 30 per cent of seats be reserved for women in local elections. This became part of the party's manifesto. She also actively campaigned for the selection of women candidates for party posts.

Later in her career, Alva was appointed Minister of State for Personnel, Public Grievances, Pensions and Parliamentary Affairs. In this capacity she worked to ensure that as many women as possible filled vacancies in institutions such as the Union Public Service Commission and the judiciary as well as in ministries at the centre and in the states.

Alva's political career has also had an international dimension. She has served on a number of international bodies and committees. She chaired the Group of Experts Meeting held in Vienna by the Women's Division of the United Nations to assess the impact of the UN Decade for Women on the issue of women and decision-making. In 1991, she participated in the expert group meeting on violence against women.

When ESCAP organised a conference on women's participation in politics in Seoul in November 1992, Alva was elected Chairperson. In 1994, she was invited to join a panel of eminent persons set up by ESCAP to draw up a Plan for Human Resource Development in the Asian region; the panel met in Bangkok in November of that year. She is currently a member of the group set up by the UN Fund for Population Activities

(UNFPA) to plan follow-up action to the World Population Conference held in Cairo in 1994.

Enabling Factors

Strong support from her family, including a high degree of encouragement from her husband and her father-in-law, has played a key role in Alva's high profile political career. As she says, "I never had to face any family constraints on my political activities." Financial security – her husband owns a flourishing export business – has also underwritten her work in an important way.

Perspective on Women in Politics

Alva emphasises the value to women politicians of having supportive male colleagues within the party: "I've always had their full confidence when I've discussed key issues. Within my party, I've never been discriminated against on the grounds of sex."

A strong advocate of affirmative action for women, she argues that reservation of electoral seats and jobs for women should remain in place for at least the next 25 years. This, she believes, will enable Indian women to achieve equality and participate more fully in nation building.

Also important, she says, is the support that up-and-coming women politicians should receive from veterans like herself. Having served on election campaign committees of her party at both the national and state level, she has made it a point to launch campaigns for other women candidates.

On the issue of funding, Alva highlights the need for political parties to give financial support to women candidates, a practice she says her party has adopted.

Women in politics, says Alva, need to foster very close ties with their constituents. They should attempt to garner the support of male colleagues. And – citing her own experience she says they should avoid reicting themselves to so-called "women's issues": "As far as possible, women should keep their interests broad. I've spoken out on constitutional amendments, the budget, defence – all manner of pertinent issues."

SUSHMA SWARAJ

Spokesperson of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

Member of Parliament

Former Union Minister of Information and Broadcasting

Former Minister in the State of Haryana

Sushma Swaraj, the official spokesperson of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a rising force in Indian politics since the mid-1980s, is proud of the fact that she has not "inherited" her position of prominence by virtue of

family connections. She views herself as a self-made politician who has essentially built on her gifts of oratory and public speaking, her academic aptitude and her organisational skills. For women politicians, she says, “nothing succeeds better than success. When women show they can bring in the votes, the sky is the limit.”

Early Life and Entry into Politics

Sushma Swaraj was born in 1953 into a middle-class family. She was adopted by her maternal grand-uncle, who had no children, and was raised mainly by her maternal grandparents. The atmosphere at home was liberal, and she was encouraged to engage in any activity that helped develop her personality. At school, she excelled in debating and public speaking and took a special interest in the arts: poetry, drama, classical music, the fine arts, and literature, both English and Hindi. She went on to take a Bachelor of Arts degree and then a Law degree.

Within Swaraj’s family there was a tradition of support for parties of the Hindu Right. However, as a student she was influenced by the ideas of Indian socialism, a reformist tradition lying outside the much stronger Communist movement. She was particularly influenced by the man who was to become her husband: Swaraj Kaushal, a strong supporter of the ideology of social democracy and an advocate in India’s Supreme Court.

Sushma and Kaushal were both active in the Movement for Democracy led by Jaya Prakash Narayan (popularly known as JP) in the early 1970s. This movement of protest against the Congress (I) government was one of the principal targets of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency, declared in June 1975. From then till the lifting of the Emergency in March 1977, Sushma provided free legal services to detained activists of the JP movement. It was during the Emergency, too, that Sushma and Kaushal got married; the ceremony was a simple one, without the payment of any dowry.

In 1977, when the Emergency was lifted and elections were announced, Sushma campaigned for the Janata Party and ran as a candidate for the Haryana state legislature from her home constituency, Ambala Cantonment. Her candidature was supported by her husband. During the campaign, her reputation as an anti-Emergency activist won her solid support, particularly among women and younger voters, and she duly won the seat.

Rise to the Top

Aged just 25, Sushma Swaraj found herself appointed a Cabinet Minister in the new Janata Party government of Haryana state. This made her the youngest ever Cabinet-level Minister in the Indian legislature, whether at the state or national level – a record she still holds. She was given the

Labour portfolio, a challenging one in the aftermath of the emergency when trade unions were poised to make major demands. She proved adept at handling the situation and gained in popularity during her tenure.

Later on, however, differences developed between her and the Haryana Chief Minister over the imposition in the state of Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code. She saw this move to restrict trade union activities as anti-democratic, and resigned as Labour Minister. But the then Prime Minister, Moraji Desai, intervened, and on his instructions she was reinstated by the Chief Minister.

In 1980, which saw the fall of the Janata Party government, the revival of the Congress (I) and the return of Indira Gandhi to the premiership of India, Swaraj was made President of the Haryana state unit of the Janata Party. She contested the state assembly elections from Karnal but lost.

Four years later, Swaraj parted company with the Janata Party when she decided to join the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the latest political incarnation of India's Hindu right. She explains that the Janata Party "had begun to revolve round individuals rather than ideology." The same year, 1984, she stood for parliament on the BJP ticket but lost. Electoral success had to wait until 1987, when she was again elected to the Haryana state assembly from Ambala Cantonment and was appointed Minister of Education in the Haryana state government.

In the general elections of 1989, Swaraj made another unsuccessful bid to enter the Indian National Parliament. The following year, she was elected to the Rajya Sabha, the Upper House of Parliament, and was appointed BJP spokesperson there. She at last took a seat in the Lok Sabha, the Lower House, following the 1996 general elections. These failed to give any party a clear majority.

For a brief period in 1996, the BJP ruled the country as it tried to find the necessary support in the Lok Sabha. During this period of about three weeks, Sushma Swaraj held office within the cabinet as Minister of Information and Broadcasting. In the event, the BJP was unable to sustain itself in government and Swaraj returned to the opposition benches. Since then she has acted as the party's official spokesperson, one of few women to have reached high rank in a party widely regarded as traditionalist in its attitudes and as equivocal on women's emancipation and equality.

Enabling Factors

While Swaraj essentially sees herself as a self-made politician, she acknowledges the importance to her career of a husband who has supported her politically, emotionally and in practical, financial terms. Although himself a political leader, Swaraj Kaushal entered into an arrangement with his wife by which he would work as a lawyer in order to underwrite her political career. The arrangement still stands.

Perspective on Women in Politics

Sushma Swaraj's views, in line with those of her party, tend to play down, or even discount, the existence of institutionalised barriers to women seeking a career in politics. She attributes her own failure, in 1984 and 1989, to win a national parliamentary seat, not to prejudice against women, but rather to the overall political situation and the standing of her party at those times.

Initially, Swaraj was against affirmative action for women in the political sphere. However, in a situation where the idea of reserving for women 30 per cent of seats in the national and state legislatures has gained wide acceptance among Indian political parties, the BJP has shifted its position. Swaraj now says she supports the 30 per cent quota for women in all political bodies, although she argues that it is too soon to think in terms of a 50 per cent quota.

Other than recommending that women politicians make a special effort to enlist the support of women voters, she does not really differentiate between female and male political players, arguing that both need to gain the support of the media, develop lobbying and negotiating skills, and in general "prove their worth". However, she believes that women entering politics must make a special effort to avoid marginalisation or confinement to women's issues. In her own case, she says, she has always made it a point to intervene actively in "hard issues", for example, in parliamentary debates on India's Terrorist Activities Detention Act (TADA) and on local government.

In general, says Swaraj, women in politics can only advance if they have the support of the larger women's movement. Pressure from outside parliament is crucial to women politicians seeking to bring about change – especially when there are so few of them.

PROMILA DANDAVATE

Secretary General of the Janata Dal

Former Member of Parliament

Founder Member of the Mohila Dakshta Samiti

(Organisation of Democratic Socialist Women)

Promila Dandavate's upbringing was hardly conducive to a life in politics. Her parents expected that, like millions of other middle-class Indian girls, she would marry a well-to-do man and settle down to a conventional life. But somewhere and somehow, the young Promila developed a fascination for politics – and a determination to express in practical terms her socialist ideals and commitment to justice and equality.

Today, she is respected throughout India for her integrity as a long-serving parliamentarian and for her work in the women's movement, in

particular her role in campaigns against *sati* (the tradition whereby Indian widows have been pressurised into burning themselves to death on their husbands' funeral pyres) and against the payment of the marriage dowry.

Early Life and Entry into Politics

Promila Dandavate was born in Mumbai (Bombay). She studied at Sophia School and in 1951 enrolled at the prestigious JJ School of Art – the crucible of much innovative artistic work. Here she gained a teacher's Diploma in Art. In 1961, she graduated from SNDT University, Mumbai, with a Master's degree in psychology. From 1961 to 1962, she was a Fellow at the JJ School of Art.

As a student, she actively pursued her interest in politics by involving herself with the Rashtra Seva Dal, a youth group which carried out constructive work in rural areas. She drew much of her inspiration from heroes of the Indian freedom movement and was particularly influenced by socialists such as S M Joshi and M S Gore.

Promila's marriage to Madhu Dandavate, a fellow socialist destined for national cabinet office, served to enhance and strengthen her political interests. By 1968, she stood for election to the Mumbai city council, convinced that entry into politics was the only way to bring about change. She was unsuccessful in this first electoral bid but subsequently was elected to the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's National Parliament, as a representative of Janata Dal. She again served as a Member of Parliament from 1980 to 1984.

In parliament, Dandavate introduced a number of private member's bills aimed at enhancing the status of women. These included the Dowry Prohibition Act Amendment Bill as well as bills relating to the Registration of Marriages Act and the Representation of the People's Act. She also moved the resolution to establish a national commission for women.

Dandavate proved an articulate critic of the National Commission for Women subsequently set up by the Congress(I) administration led by Rajiv Gandhi. Like many other women activists in India, she saw it as having been reduced to a watchdog body lacking adequate statutory powers. She embarked on a campaign for a national commission for women enjoying full statutory powers, mobilising women in her constituency, organising signature campaigns and public meetings, and making it a point to get the commission included in the manifesto of the Janata Dal as an election pledge.

As an activist within the Janata Dal, Dandavate has worked actively to push women's concerns higher up the party's agenda. By 1980, she points out, the party manifesto included a special section on women. She was instrumental in including in the manifesto special programmes for women in such areas as employment, combating the criminalisation of society and eliminating dowry. She has also helped sensitise the party to the issue of violence against women.

Dandavate was in the forefront of a campaign to change the law on rape so as to ensure the punishment of offenders. Once again, she demonstrated her skills as an organiser and mobiliser.

As an MP, she moved a private member's Bill to amend the Representation of the People's Act. Under this Act, candidates for public office face disqualification if they transgress India's small family norm by having more than two children. Dandavate, along with women's organisations, have seen this as discriminating against women – who often have no say in how many children they bear. Dandavate's perspective on population policy emphasises the need to link family planning with improving the social and economic status of women; women, she says, "must be empowered to exercise their reproductive rights."

As a member of the Steering Committee of the National Perspective Plan for Women, she worked hard to ensure that issues were discussed openly and comprehensively. She also advocated that non-government organisations draw up an alternative perspective plan to include discussion of all women's concerns.

Dandavate was a founder member of the Mahila Dakshata Samiti, the all-India Organisation of Democratic Socialist Women. This has campaigned for the rights of women, opposing discrimination in all its forms and exposing atrocities against women such as bride-burning and *sati*. It has also been in the forefront of campaigns against dowry and other social practices recognised as detrimental to women.

Dandavate remains as the Secretary General of the Janata Dal.

Enabling Factors

Dandavate identifies her immediate family – her husband, son, daughter-in-law and grandchild – as extremely supportive of her life in politics. Her marriage to Madhu Dandavate, a kindred spirit politically as well as in emotional terms, has also been of central importance; it was Madhu, she says, who gave her "exposure to, and greater awareness of, political life."

Perspective on Women in Politics

Dandavate is a strong advocate of affirmative action to bring greater numbers of women into public life. She supports the one third quota of seats for women in local and national government. However, she stresses that this should be a temporary measure, accompanied by greater education and training for women to help them overcome historical disadvantage. Such training, she believes, should begin at the grass-roots level, with the emphasis on helping women understand how they can bring about change both in their own lives and in broader social terms.

Dandavate argues for greater autonomy of action by the women's wings of political parties, which should not be treated as mere adjuncts or appendages, or as silent resources to be tapped only at election time. She

advocates that women directly participate in the process of selecting candidates, rather than simply suggesting names. On the question of financial backing for women politicians, Dandavate recommends that women make it a point to link up with constituents who raise funds for election campaigns.

Far from advocating any blanket hostility to male politicians, she stresses the need for women to cultivate the support of men who are "gender sensitive." It is vital, too, she argues, that women in politics work closely with the larger women's movement. She recalls that whenever, during her stint in parliament, she moved a bill relating to women's issues, she created space for dialogue with a broad range of organisations. She attended workshops and seminars and also wrote articles for newspapers in order to stimulate debate and mobilise opinion.

As for the personal qualities that women need to cultivate for a successful and effective political career, Dandavate highlights dedication, a capacity for hard work, personal integrity and the readiness to "do your own homework."