

WOMEN AND POLITICS IN INDIA

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DECLARATION

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Philosophy of the Jawaharlal Nehru University. I certify that no portion of this dissertation has previously been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma of this or any other University.

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PREFACE

This essay is the outcome of research carried out in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree of Master of Philosophy of the Jawaharlal Nehru University. It deals with the status and contribution of women in the field of politics. The essay is based on secondary materials and has been inspired by a desire to identify the data available as well as the lacunae in our knowledge about the political status of women. It is preparatory to a larger study and consequently the conclusions presented herein are tentative in the extreme.

I should like to acknowledge the help and encouragement received in the preparation of this essay. I am grateful to the Indian Council of Social Science Research for a doctoral fellowship that has made it possible for me to undertake research and to the Centre for Political Studies for providing facilities for it. I am also grateful to my teachers in the Centre who taught me how to do research and whose insights about politics I have, though quite unsuccessfully, tried to make my own. I must also thank Miss Padmini Ramaswami for making her paper on the same topic available to me.

I am deeply indebted to Prof. Imtiaz Ahmad, my Supervisor, who not only supervised my work, but was a constant source of valuable ideas, criticism and friendship during my work on the paper. It would be no exaggeration to say that this paper would not have taken its present form without his help and encouragement. Needless to say, I am alone responsible for the many weaknesses from which this essay admittedly suffers.

New Delhi,
September 3, 1974.

REKHA CHAKRABARTY

WOMEN AND POLITICS IN INDIA

INTRODUCTION

Indian political scientists have paid little attention to the study of women.¹ A number of empirical studies of electoral participation and political behaviour have been carried out during the last two decades, largely under the influence of Western behavioural social science, by political scientists in India. However, these studies have been concerned exclusively with the political behaviour of men.¹ Most of these studies have entirely excluded women from the sample of respondents. Some studies have covered women but the number of women respondents in them is so low that no generalisation can be derived about the political attitudes

1. The bibliography on Indian elections and the political behaviour of voters in elections is quite extensive. The tendency of scholars to limit their attention to male voters can be discerned from the following: Yogesh Atal, Local Communities and National Politics, Delhi, 1967, Rajni Kothari, H.R. Sheth, Bashiruddin Ahmad and Ramashray Roy, 'Voting in India', Economic and Political Weekly (Annual Number), 1972 and Ramashray Roy, The Uncertain Verdict, Delhi, 1972. The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, has been conducting national sample surveys during elections since 1962. The first survey collected information on women, but subsequently this practice seems to have been abandoned. The publications of the Centre have consistently excluded women from discussions of the electoral process in India.

of women from them.²

This essay deals with the position and role of Indian women in the political life of the country. Given the general paucity of data, a comprehensive study of this subject would seem difficult at present. Perhaps, a series of studies focussing specifically on women would be required before any general picture of the pattern of their political participation can be attempted. All that this essay attempts is to discuss the broad trends and patterns of political involvement and participation among women.

The object of this paper is three fold. Firstly, it tries to critically evaluate existing evidence about women so as to formulate a tentative picture about the nature and type of participation by women in politics. Secondly, it attempts to identify the areas where data are available as well as are lacking, and to formulate some questions that can help in the understanding of women's role and behaviour in politics. Finally, the paper presents some tentative

2. See, for example, C.P. Bhanbri and P.S. Varma, Urban Voter, Delhi, 1973, and V.M. Sirsikar, Sovereigns without Crowns, Bombay, 1973. Several factors would seem to account for the general lack of scholarly interest in the study of women. The first reason seems to be the low status of women itself. As a result of this, an impression has become widespread that women are generally apathetic towards political matters and lack consciousness of their political rights and privileges. This impression seems to have been accepted by political scientists resulting in the exclusion of women from consideration. Secondly, it probably owes itself to operational difficulties involved in the study of women. Paucity of an adequate number of trained research workers would seem to make it difficult for the political scientist interested in the study of women to collect information from women during elections.

statements regarding the reasons for the pattern of behaviour of women that becomes evident from available data. The discussion is based throughout on secondary sources of data and available published literature and is exploratory in character. It has been undertaken to clarify the subject, identify areas of research and formulate some hypotheses for a larger empirical study that the present author proposes to undertake in the near future.

SOCIAL POSITION OF WOMEN

The political status and role of women is largely a reflection of the overall position accorded to them in society. It would, therefore, be useful to begin this discussion of the political status of Indian women with a consideration of their general social position.

Several difficulties arise in discussing the social position of women in Indian society. For one thing, the social and cultural diversities that characterize this country are so bewildering that one can generalize about the status of women throughout the country only at the risk of oversimplification.³ The status of women varies within each religion, region, caste and class. Secondly, the criteria that may be employed in assessing the status of women are themselves uncertain. This is particularly true in cases where the attitudes toward women are ambivalent and evidence for assessing

3. For a detailed discussion of these diversities see Andre Beteille, 'The Position of Women in Indian Society', in Devaki Jain (ed.), Women in India, Delhi, (In press).

the position accorded to them is conflicting. Lastly, the status accorded to Indian women has varied from time to time according to the progressive and reactionary trends of the times. Thus, women were accorded a considerably high position during the early ancient period, but it declined thereafter. The decline continued until the early nineteenth century when a woman was sometimes viewed ".... as a goddess and at other times as a slave", but never (as) a human being with a personality.⁴ These diversities and variations naturally make the task of characterizing the social position of women in Indian society difficult.

Perhaps, we may fruitfully consider the social position of women in India during two broad periods, using the establishment of British rule as the basis of distinguishing them. This was an event of considerable significance and promoted a new conception of themselves among Indian women. We may, therefore, examine what the social position of women was during these two periods and what forces were set in motion by the introduction of western values through the establishment of British rule.

Position of Women in Pre-British India

The history of Indian society begins with the Indus Valley Civilization. Little dependable information is available about the social position of women during this early period, and whatever we do know is often a blend of archaeological speculation and guess work.

4. Neera Desai, Women in Modern India, Bombay, 1957, p.9.

However, our knowledge about women becomes surer as we enter the early Vedic period. The vast body of literature relating to this and the subsequent periods provides unmistakable clues as to the position enjoyed by women in Indian society.

The early ancient period has been described by many as the most glorious period in the history of Indian women.⁵ This characterization would appear to be an exaggeration. The early Vedic society was basically patriarchal and discriminated between a son and a daughter. The son was preferred to the daughter and all efforts were made to ensure the birth of a son. It is, nevertheless, true that women enjoyed greater freedom during this early period of Indian civilization and they did not suffer from some of the disabilities that came to characterize them subsequently. As Basham has remarked, "... while a women's freedom was generally much restricted, it was rarely completely taken away."⁶

Women during the early ancient period enjoyed most of the privileges to which men were entitled and participated on an equal footing with them in social, religious and public life of the community. They were educated as much as men and could continue their studies throughout their lives.⁷ A few Vedic hymns were ascribed to

5. See, for instance, B.S. Upadhyay, Women in Rig Veda, Banaras, 1974, also see S.C. Sarkar, Some Aspects of Earliest Social History, Delhi, 1928.

6. Basham, A.L. Wonder That was India, New York, 1959, p.180.

7. Altkar, A.S. Position of Women in Hindu Civilization from Pre-historic Times to the Present Day, Delhi, 1962, p.13.

women seers and the Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad tells of a learned lady, Gargi Vacknavi, who attended the discussions of sage Vajnavalkya.⁸ References occur here and there of girls attending the lectures of gurus, and mastering at least a part of the Vedas. The Rig Veda also depicts young men and unmarried girls mixing freely, and gives evidence that women were present in all social and public gatherings and participated in discussions and assemblies.⁹

The relatively high position accorded to women in early ancient period underwent a process of gradual decline subsequently. Principal among the factors that contributed to this decline was the development of certain eschatological notions which enhanced the significance of sons and lowered the position of daughters. The birth of a son came to be regarded as important for the parents to go to heaven since he alone was capable of redeeming them from hell.¹⁰ This change was, of course, also underscored by certain deeper economic changes that were taking place as a result of transformation to a feudal mode of production.

The codification of Hindu Law created a legal and theoretical basis for the subordination of women. They were subjected to numerous restrictions and the freedom enjoyed by them was systematically curtailed. Their first duty came to be to wait on their husbands, fetching

8. Basham, Op. cit., p. 173.

9. Altekar, Op. cit., pp. 190-191.

10. P. Thomas, Indian Women Through the Ages, Bombay, 1964, p.57.

and carrying for them, rubbing their feet when they were weary, rising before them and going to bed after them.¹¹ Seclusion of women came to be accepted and women, especially those of the upper classes, were kept at a distance from the opposite sex. The Arthashastra, in many ways more liberal than the religious law books, laid down stringent rules for the punishment of immodest wives.¹²

Placement of social constrictions on women naturally curtailed their participation in public life. By the time of Sauris, around the beginning of the Christian era, Vedic knowledge had already become closed to women. By 300 B.C., even secular knowledge was denied to them and they were forced to domestic life. This process of subordination was possibly briefly interrupted during the Buddhist period when women were admitted to the 'Order'. However, the Buddhist influence in India was shortlived and women continued to be accorded

11. See Arthashastra, II, 25. Quoted in Basham, *op. cit.*, pp. 190-91.

12. It reads, "A woman who insolently takes part in games, or drinks against her husband's wishes is to be fined three panas. If she leaves her home without his permission to visit another woman she is to be fined six panas, if she visits a man the fine is twelve, while she goes on such errands by night, the fine is doubled. If she leaves the house while her husband is asleep or drunk she is to be fined twelve panas. If a man and a woman make gestures of sexual import to one another, or converse facetiously in secret, the woman is to be fined twenty four panas and the man twice that sum. If the conversation takes place in a suspicious place, lashes may be substituted for panas and in the village sphere a Candala shall give her five lashes on each side of the body". Thus the husband had almost unlimited rights over his wife's movements (*Ibid.*, p. 179).

a relatively inferior status in society.¹³

The Muslim period witnessed a further decline in the status of women. The institution of purdah, which had no doubt existed in latter ancient India, became more rigid. The institution of Sati was adopted and the marriage age became lower. These changes in social customs naturally placed further restrictions upon women and constricted the degree and extent of their participation in public life.¹⁴

History provides many examples of women, such as Razia Sultana, Nurjahan and Rajput queens, who had been prominent in the fields of politics and administration. However the number of such women was very small and they represented exceptions rather than the rule. Furthermore, these women belonged to the elite groups of society. Ordinary women had no role in politics. Public opinion throughout this period was opposed to the accession of women to the throne and to their holding of high political and administrative posts. It was held that women could not become efficient administrators on account of their natural limitations.¹⁵ Politics, thus became a domain of men and women had no share in it.

13. Even under the liberal rules of Buddhism a nun, however advanced in the faith, was always subordinate to the youngest novice among the brethren. See Bashin, Op. cit., p. 177.

14. Some of these changes in the position of women are discussed in Tata Chand, Influence of Islam on Indian Culture, Allahabad, 1954.

15. Aitker, Op. cit., pp. 185-86.

Position of Women in British India

The advent of the British rule marked an important turning point in the history of Indian women. The British rulers were quite apathetic and indifferent towards the social conditions prevailing in India. However, the cumulative effect of the interactions between the Indian and western cultures promoted a new conception of womanhood. As O'Malley noted,

the impact of the West on the Indian Civilization has brought about changes that are more fundamental in case of women than of men. To men it brought a new conception of the world, of its material resources, ethical standards and political possibilities, but to the women it brought slowly but potently a new conception of themselves. If men reassessed themselves as citizen in a new India, women revalued themselves as human beings in a new social order.¹⁶

Under the impact of the western ideals of democracy, liberty and equality, a number of socio religious reform movements started in India.¹⁷ The avowed objective of several of these reform movements was to improve the social conditions of women.¹⁸ Efforts were made to kindle self-confidence among them by exposing them to western education. All social customs which stood in the way of women's progress were challenged and extensive campaigns were carried

16. L.S.S. O'Malley, Modern India and The West, London, 1941, p. 475.

17. For a discussion of the social reform movements see C.H. Heinsath, Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform, Bombay, 1964.

18. For a discussion of the concern of early social reformers for ameliorating the social position of women see D.D. Karve, The New Brahmins-Five Maharashtra Families, Berkeley, 1963.

out among the masses to promote social equality for women. Furthermore, the government was pressed to use legislative powers to legalise social reforms.¹⁹

Alongside the socio-religious reform movements, the spread of education among Indian women was also responsible for a change in their status. Feminine literacy before the British period was considered "a source of moral danger, ... since only the dancing girls could normally read and write."²⁰ Education, at the most, was a prerogative of the noble and royal families. As a result of the efforts of Christian missionaries, pioneers of modern education in India, attempts were made to spread education among women and schools were established for them. Western education, at first, found popularity only among the upper classes, but, with the passage of time, it also came to be appreciated by the middle classes.

The spread of education among women helped to broaden their outlook and to give them self-confidence. As a result, the leadership of the movement for emancipation of women passed into the hands of a number of educated women. Several women's organisations sprang up in many parts of the country at the turn of the twentieth century to press for recognition of women's rights. Women's Indian Association was the first such organisation. It was established in 1917. Later on, two more all-India organizations -

19. See C. Metcalf, The Aftermath of Revolt, Columbia, 1965.

20. Altekar, Op. cit., p. 24.

National Council of Women of India and All-India Women's Conference also took up the cause of Indian Women.

Originally, the activities of these organizations were limited to spread of education among women and political activities were eschewed. The constitution of several of these organizations explicitly prohibited their members from any form of political activity. For instance, an amendment introduced in 1934 by Mrs. Masani to the constitution of the All-India Women's Conference, allowing Women members to participate in politics was defeated with an overwhelming majority. The majority of the members of the organization were wives or daughters of bureaucrats and government officials. It was felt that participation in political affairs by the organization and its individual members might jeopardise the position of their husbands or fathers.²¹ Later on, however, these organizations were drawn into the vortex of politics and they played a prominent role in the franchise movement of women in India.

WOMEN AND POLITICS IN BRITISH INDIA

Political consciousness was slow to develop among Indian women. It was as late as 1917, when the Women's Movement had already made a considerable headway in other countries of the world, that the struggle for the political emancipation of Indian women started. The initiative for the movement was taken by western women.

21. See S. Saraswati, 'Political Status of Women in India', Paper prepared for the Status of Women Committee, New Delhi, 1974 (mimeographed).

Indian women joined it later. The movement was very shortlived and women did not have to wage a struggle to achieve their political rights.²²

The Franchise Movement

The Indian women's franchise movement started in 1917, when Mr. Edwin Samuel Montagu, the then Secretary of State for India, came to study the social conditions prevailing in India before giving effect to constitutional reforms. A deputation of Indian women consisting of representatives of various women's organizations waited upon him and placed before him the 'Demand for the Grant of Vote'.²³ These women stated that the interests of Indian women were directly affected by the demand in the United Scheme drawn up by the National Congress and Muslim League (L.S), namely, that "The members of the Council should be elected directly by the people on as broad a franchise as possible," and in the non-official Memorandum of the Imperial Legislative Council that "the franchise should be broadened and extended directly to the people."²⁴ They further stated that,

22. Ibid.

23. These women's organizations included women's Indian Association, the Seva Sadan, Mahila Seva Samaj, the Indian Women's University, the Women's Home Rule League Branches, etc.

24. Copy of the address presented by the All-India Women's Deputation to Lord Chelmsford and Mr. Montagu, 1st Dec., 1917.

when such a franchise is being drawn up, women may be recognised as 'people', and that it may be worded in such terms as will not disqualify female sex, but allowwomen the same representation as ... men.²⁵

It was also demanded that Local Self-Government should be introduced in India and women should be accorded representation in local bodies.

No mention of women was made in the Montagu - Chelmsford Scheme of Reforms for India, though it suggested larger representation for Indians in Legislative Councils and a widening of the electorate. Two Committees were appointed to investigate the suggestions put forward in the Reform Scheme and to transform them on a workable basis. The Southborough Franchise Committee was appointed to deal with the question of elections. When this Committee toured India, it was approached by a deputation of women and a requisition signed by about eight hundred educated women of the Bombay Presidency, demanding the removal of sex disqualification from the franchise proposal, was submitted to it. This demand was rejected on the ground that social customs regarding Indian women made the granting of franchise premature. It was argued that, "until the custom of seclusion followed by many classes and communities is relaxed, female suffrage would hardly be a reality."²⁶

25. *Ibid.*

26. Quoted in Thomas, *Op. cit.*, p. 355.

This neglect of women by the Southborough Committee was strongly protested to by women's organizations in different parts of the country. It was argued that the capability of women to exercise their right to vote was proved by the fact that women of Bombay already enjoyed the Municipal vote and exercised it efficiently.²⁷

After the introduction of the Government of India Bill in the British Parliament in July 1919, a Joint Select Committee of both the Houses was appointed to take the evidence of Indian representatives on the suggested reforms. All the Indian deputationists without exception supported the demand that qualified women should be granted the right to vote. In August of that year a deputation consisting of Indian men and women waited upon the Secretary of State to urge the cause of women. (Later on, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu handed in a paper to the Joint Select Committee in London supporting women's franchise in India. The Joint Select Committee decided to leave the question of franchise to be settled by the future Legislative Councils for each province.)

The provinces readily granted the right to vote to women. Madras was the first province to enfranchise women on the same terms as men in 1921. It was followed by Bombay in the same year. The United Provinces enfranchised women in 1923, Bengal in 1925, Punjab

27. Women's Indian Association, Harmeret Cousins and her Work in India, Delhi, 1956, p. 14.

in 1926 and Central Provinces in 1927. Of the major provinces, Bihar was most reluctant to grant the right to vote to women. It was in 1929, only after practically all the India states and provinces had enfranchised women, that Bihar granted this right to women.²⁸

Once women were enfranchised on the same terms as men, it did not take them long to win the right to be elected to Legislative Councils. Following an agitation started by women to remove sex disqualification from contesting elections to legislatures, the British Parliament deleted from the Reforms Bill the clause which barred women's entry into legislative councils. Thus, in 1926, Indian women also won the right to become members of Indian legislative bodies.

The demand for universal adult franchise was the final step in the franchise movement of Indian women. Since property and education qualifications of franchise excluded the majority of women from enjoying the right to vote, three leading women's organisations - Women's Indian Association, All India Women's Conference and the National Council of Women of India - sent their representatives to the Lothian Committee and the Joint Select Committee to demand universal adult franchise and to oppose the provisions of reservation of seats and 'wifehood' and 'widowhood' qualifications in the proposed Government of India Bill. It was argued that these provisions were

²⁸ Desai, *Op. cit.*, p. 219.

undemocratic, placed premium on women and did not recognize their independent suffrage right. Since universal adult franchise was the only right and just method of securing representation of the people in a democratic state, it was demanded that the attainment of adult suffrage should be made possible from the very beginning of the enforcement of the new constitution.²⁹ The Government of India Act, 1935, enfranchised a larger number of women, but it did not concede the demand for universal adult franchise. The principle of adult franchise was incorporated in the constitution of independent India.

This brief account of the franchise movement of Indian women clearly shows that the movement was very shortlived and was not particularly vigorous.³⁰ While western women had to wage a hard struggle for a very long time and had to face beating and imprisonment etc., Indian women were fortunate to achieve their political equality without such sufferings. The relative ease with which they were able to achieve their political rights was mainly due to three reasons. Firstly, the movement of Indian women took place at a time when most of the western countries had already granted political rights to women. Secondly, Indian women did not face any opposition from men. Unlike western men who were strongly opposed to women's equal political status, Indian men supported the cause of women throughout their

29. Women's Indian Association, Op. cit., pp. 80-82.

30. Menon, Op. cit., p. 63.

struggle. Thirdly, Indian women also had the backing of the International Suffragist Movement and the leaders of the Indian Nationalist Movement.

Moreover, it is also evident that movement was not widespread and was limited to an elite group of high class women. It was led by English women, such as Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinarjadas, who had actively participated in the franchise movement of British women, and was supported by western educated Indian women. So far as ordinary women were concerned, they were not affected by it. They did not demand legal and political equality and took no part in the movement. As such, the franchise movement of Indian women was not a mass movement but a movement of the women intelligentsia.

Women and Electoral Participation

Politics was traditionally the domain of men and women had no place in it. With the success of the franchise movement, an avenue for women's participation in politics was opened. For the first time in 1920's women were granted the right to vote and to be elected to decision-making bodies on the same terms as men.

Women had achieved their political equality through a struggle though short-lived. It could be expected that they would participate effectively and their contribution in the field of politics would be considerable. However, a study of the pre-independence period shows that women were unable to play any effective role in politics and the extent of their participation in electoral politics was limited.

The main reason for this was that the number of women enfranchised was extremely low. Although they were granted franchise on the same terms as men, a great gap existed in the number of men and women who enjoyed this right. Thus, while 6.8 million men were granted the right of franchise in the years between 1921 to 1933, only 3,15 and 651 women were eligible to vote during the same period.³¹ The qualifications laid down for franchise were such that only a small number of women could fulfill them. For a woman to be a voter, it was necessary that she should either have held a certain amount of property or she should have been a graduate of seven years' standing. The social conditions prevailing at that time did not allow many women to hold property or to acquire high education. Consequently, the number of women voters came to be far lower than the number of men voters.

This is clear from Table I which presents the ratio between male and female voters during 1921-1933. It shows that the gap between male and female voters was narrowest in Madras and Bombay. But even here only one woman was enfranchised against every ten men. This gap widened in Bengal, Central Provinces, Punjab and Bihar and Orissa where the ratio of men and women voters was in the proportion of 1:16, 1:25, 1:29 and 1:62 respectively. It became widest in Assam. For every 114 men only one woman was enfranchised there.

31. UNESCO, Status of Women in South Asia, New Delhi, 1956.

TABLE I
DISTRIBUTION OF ENFRANCHISED WOMEN 1921 - 1933

| | PROVINCE | MEN | WOMEN |
|----|-------------------|-----|-------|
| 1. | Madras | 10 | 1 |
| 2. | Bombay | 10 | 1 |
| 3. | Bengal | 16 | 1 |
| 4. | Central Provinces | 25 | 1 |
| 5. | Punjab | 29 | 1 |
| 6. | Bihar & Orissa | 62 | 1 |
| 7. | Assam | 114 | 1 |

Source: Shyam Kumari Nehru (ed.), Our Cause, Allahabad, 1935.

The Government of India Act, 1935 relaxed certain qualifications regarding women's franchise and introduced 'wifehood' and 'widowhood' qualifications.³² Consequently, the number of women voters increased. But still their proportion to men voters remained very low. The ratio of women to men voters, which was recommended by the Simon Commission in the proportion of 1:2, came

32. The Government of India Act, 1935, allowed the following categories of women to take part in elections as voters: (a) those who held some property and taxation qualifications as applicable to men, (b) those who were able to read and write in an Indian language, (c) those who, were the wives and widows of persons possessing the necessary property qualifications, (d) those who were the wives and widows of persons assessed in the previous financial year for the payment of income tax, and (e) those who were wives of retired, pensioned or discharged officers or soldiers of His Majesty's Regular Forces.

actually in practice in the proportion of 1:7.³³ The Government of India Act enfranchised 35 million (14 per cent) Indian people, of which only five million were women.³⁴ The large majority of lower as well as middle class women were again excluded from the exercise of franchise.

Women As Voters :- The extent of women's participation was not only limited by the number of women who enjoyed the right of franchise. It was also limited by the number of enfranchised women who actually exercised their vote. Even the few eligible women voters did not display much enthusiasm to exercise their newly achieved right. The turnout of women voters in practically all the elections was extremely poor.

Tables II and III present the number and percentage of women voters who actually exercised their vote in the elections to the Provincial Legislative Councils and Legislative Assemblies held after the introduction of provincial autonomy in 1937. The picture which emerges from the results of elections to Legislative Councils presented in Table II would appear to be very encouraging indeed. With the exception of Bengal and United Provinces, the percentage of women voters who exercised their vote was above 50 and in case of Assam it rose to as high as 92. It would, however, be misleading

33. Women's Indian Association Op. cit., p. 82.

34. Margaret Cousins, Indian Womenhood Today, Allahabad, 1947.

to read these figures as suggesting a high degree of participation in election on the part of women or as indicating a keenness on their part to exercise their political right. The percentage of women voters who cast their votes in the election to the Legislative Councils tended to be high because the total size of the female electorate was limited to a few thousands. The situation was different with the elections to the Legislative Assemblies where the number of enrolled women was much higher.

TABLE II

WOMEN VOTERS FOR PROVINCIAL LEGISLATIVE COUNCILS

| PROVINCE | ENROLLED | IN CONTESTED CONSTITUENCY | Voted | % AGE OF COLS. 3 & 4 |
|-----------|----------|---------------------------|-------|----------------------|
| 1. Madras | 2796 | 2573 | 1420 | 51.1 |
| 2. Bombay | 1755 | 1636 | 923 | 56.4 |
| 3. Bengal | 3763 | 2136 | 457 | 20.5 |
| 4. U.P. | 2262 | 1634 | 598 | 33.5 |
| 5. Bihar | 1060 | 882 | 594 | 67.34 |
| 6. Assam | 1127 | 559 | 512 | 91.57 |

Source: National Planning Committee Report: Women's Role in a Planned Economy, Bombay, 1947, p.33.

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Table III presents the data on women's participation in elections to the Legislative Assemblies. It is seen from this table that, with the exception of North West Frontier Provinces, less than fifty percent women voters exercised their vote in the elections to the Legislative Assemblies. Bengal recorded the lowest turnout of women voters. Out of nine million eligible women voters, only forty-seven thousand women exercised their right to vote in that province. It was followed by Orissa and Bihar, where female voter turnout was as low as 6.6 per cent and 7.9 per cent respectively.

The picture of Central Provinces and Berar, Assam and United Provinces was also ~~was~~ equally discouraging. The percentage of women voters who cast their votes was less than thirty percent in these provinces. The position was slightly better in Punjab, Sind, Madras and Bombay, but here again the voting turnout among women was less than 43 per cent.

Women As Legislators :- The generally passive orientation of women as voters was again reflected at the level of decision-making. Although women were accorded the right to contest elections to the legislatures as early as 1926, it was through government nominations rather than through elections that some women were able to become members of legislatures before the introduction of provincial autonomy.

The Government of India Act, 1935, provided for reservation of seats for women in federal and provincial legislatures on a communal basis. It was mainly through such reservations that eighty women

TABLE III
WOMEN VOTERS IN LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLIES

| PROVINCES | NO. ENROLLED | NO. IN CONTESTED CONSTITUENCY | NO. VOTED | %AGE OF 4 CH Col. 3 |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------------------------|-----------|---------------------|
| 1. Madras | 15,84,784 | 15,23,248 | 4,79,278 | 31.5 |
| 2. Bombay | 3,35,890 | 3,05,750 | 1,29,535 | 42.4 |
| 3. Bengal | 9,70,033 | 8,96,588 | 46,753 | -5.2 |
| 4. U.P. | 5,20,380 | 4,94,752 | 95,553 | 19.3 |
| 5. Bihar | 2,99,064 | 2,15,490 | 17,037 | 7.9 |
| 6. Punjab | 1,89,105 | 1,73,459 | 53,236 | 33.56 |
| 7. C.P. & Berar | 2,63,331 | 2,59,750 | 63,744 | 24.5 |
| 8. Assam | 45,366 | 29,680 | 8,676 | 29.23 |
| 9. H.W.F.P. | 4,895 | 4,895 | 3,498 | 71.4 |
| 10. Orissa | 79,208 | 70,526 | 4,670 | 6.62 |
| 11. Sind | 32,668 | 27,940 | 9,705 | 34.7 |

Source: National Planning Committee Report: Women's Role in a Planned Economy, Bombay, 1947, p. 39.

were elected to the various provincial legislatures after the elections were held in February 1937. Table IV presents the distribution of reserved seats. Of these, only eight women in the Lower Houses and two in the Upper Houses could be elected from general (non-reserved) seats for both men and women. There was only one woman member in the Central Legislative Assembly.³⁵

Women were not only unable to get proportionate representation in decision making bodies, but they also failed to represent the cross-sections of society. Almost all the women legislators belonged to the upper strata of society. Lower classes were not represented at all. The socio-economic background of women legislators shows that almost all of them were educated and many held careers. In many cases (12 per cent) the husbands of women legislators were also members of the Legislatures. The rest were the wives of those holding high positions in society.³⁶

Even these highly placed women could not achieve much during their membership in the legislatures. The position and influence they held were not of any great significance. Thus only

35. This low number of women legislators was closely comparable to the number of women elected to the legislatures of other countries at that time. For example, there were only 148 women in the State Legislatures of U.S.A and two in the Senate and 138 women in the Russian Legislatures. The situation was worse in European countries. There were only 11 women legislators in Sweden, 7 in Denmark, 13 in Czechoslovakia, and 16 in Finland, the first country to enfranchise women, before the Second World War.

36. Margaret Cousins, *Op. cit.*, pp. 50-57.

TABLE IVSEATS RESERVED IN FEDERAL AND PROVINCIAL LEGISLATURES

| SEATS | FEDERAL | | | | PROVINCIAL | | | | | |
|------------------|---------|----|---|----|------------|---|----|----|---|---|
| | W | T | W | T | G | H | IC | IA | S | T |
| 1. Madras | 1 | 20 | 2 | 37 | 6 | 1 | 7 | | | 8 |
| 2. Bombay | 1 | 16 | 2 | 30 | 5 | 1 | | | | 6 |
| 3. Bengal | 1 | 20 | 1 | 37 | 2 | 2 | | 1 | | 5 |
| 4. Uttar Pradesh | 1 | 30 | 1 | 37 | 4 | 2 | | | | 6 |
| 5. Punjab | 1 | | 1 | 30 | 1 | 2 | | | 1 | 4 |
| 6. Bihar | 1 | 16 | 1 | 30 | 3 | 1 | | | | 4 |
| 7. C.P. & Berar | | 8 | 1 | 15 | 3 | | | | | 3 |
| 8. Assam | - | 5 | - | 15 | 2 | | | | | 1 |
| 9. Orissa | - | 5 | - | 5 | 2 | | | | | 2 |
| 10. Sind | - | 5 | - | 5 | 1 | 1 | | | | 2 |

Source: S. Sarawati, Political Status of Women in India, Paper prepared for the status of Women Committee, 1974 (Mimeographed).

seven women took offices and only one of them was appointed as a minister. The portfolio she held was of limited significance (Local Self Government and Public Health). The rest could not manage to get any office higher than that of Deputy Speaker, Deputy President of Legislatures and Parliamentary Secretaries.

Moreover, women were unable to establish any individual or collective influence in the legislatures. Collectively, they could not do much as they were scattered in various provinces and usually their number in each provincial legislature did not exceed two or three. Individually, they could not exert any influence, since they were mainly dependent upon men. In the words of a contemporary politician, women legislators were,

... predominantly the representatives of men and of their communal bias, and their way of playing the political game, rather than of women's votes or views. For the two and half years in which all the women functioned in the legislatures, they proved to be chiefly voters with men in party divisions more like *achos* and sheep than creators of new social and economic order.³⁷

Women and National Movement

The legislatures were formally constituted political bodies. Outside of these formal institutional structures, women could participate in politics through the movement for national independence. It is, therefore, essential to look at the part played by women in the struggle for national independence.

37. Ibid.

The history of the national movement dates back to the establishment of the Indian National Congress. The Congress was essentially an elite organisation and its initial activities were largely constitutional in character. The leaders of the Congress met in periodic sessions to pass resolutions and request special favours from the government. The Congress was exclusively comprised by men during this early period. No doubt, the membership of the Congress was open to women from its inception, the women were not particularly drawn into its activities. Occasionally, a few women attended Congress sessions, but reasons for their involvement were not always political. According to Cousin's estimate,

... in those early days women went to those Congress sessions merely as helpmates of their husbands to look after their creature comforts than because of their individual interest in the debates.³⁸

This situation changed partially with the entry of Dr. (Mrs.) Annie Besant, a British woman, into the political field and the broadening of the Congress base under a militant leadership. Through her India Home Rule League, formed in 1914, women were drawn in some strength to the national movement. She succeeded in creating a vast network of branches of her organisation in different parts of the country and involving women in political activities. Thus, when Mrs. Besant was interned by the British government for carrying out propoganda for Indian freedom, women for the first time organized themselves into a procession and protested against her interment by

38. Ibid.

the government.³⁹ Politics was, however, still a restricted activity for women and was confined to upper class women. The general female population neither possessed any direct awareness of the issues involved nor was it involved in political activities in any way.

The rise in the involvement of women in political activities through the India Home Rule League coincided with an increase in the number of women delegates at Congress sessions. Table V presents the number of women who attended the Congress Sessions during 1918-1923. It shows that the percentage of women delegates at these sessions increased by almost six times. The number of women who attended the sessions was still very small and usually comprized women of the upper socio-economic strata. Even so, there is no doubt that women had come to show greater interest in political matters.

TABLE V

WOMEN DELEGATES AT CONGRESS SESSIONS 1918-1923

| CONGRESS SESSION | WOMEN DELEGATES | % AGE OF TOTAL DELEGATES |
|------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| YEAR | | |
| 1918 | 27 | 0.55 |
| 1919 | 74 | 0.90 |
| 1920 | 160 | 1.16 |
| 1921 | 144 | 3.00 |
| 1922 | No information | No information |
| 1923 | 60 | 3.61 |
| 1923 | 60 | 2.62 |
| 39. Ibid. | | |

Source: Gopal Krishna, 'The Development of the Indian National Congress as a Mass Organization,' Journal of Asian Studies 25 (3), 1966, p.421.

Gandhi's emergence on the political horizon at the time broadened the social base of the national movement and drew an increasingly large number of women into the vortex of nationalist politics.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, no systematic study of the extent and nature of women's participation in the national movement during the Gandhian period has been attempted so far. Most of the available accounts have tried to glorify the influence of Gandhi in stimulating women to participate in national politics and attribute the rise in the participation of women in political agitations to Gandhi's personal charisma.⁴¹ There has been no attempt to examine whether women's participation was a direct response to the presence of Gandhi at the helm of affairs or whether it owed itself to the nature of the movement itself.

Gandhi's attitude toward women's participation in the national movement was quite negative initially.⁴² At the time of launching the salt Satyagrah, he had objected to women joining the Satyagrah. As a matter of fact, he felt that the involvement of women with the Satyagrah would 'complicate things.'⁴³ Even though this

40. See A.N. Mazumdar, Social Welfare in India: Mahatma Gandhi's Contributions, Bombay, 1964, pp. 104-112, for a discussion of this point.

41. See, for instance, Frieda Hauswirth, Gender Status of Indian Women, London, 1932, Tara Ali Baig (ed.), Women of India, New Delhi, 1958.

42. Gandhi's attitude toward women is discussed at length in Erick Erickson, Gandhi's Truth, Boston, 1968.

43. Women's Indian Association, Op. cit. pp. 71-72.

attitude was protested to by the women's organisations⁴⁴ Gandhi included no women among the marchers to Dandi.

However, the progress of the Gandhian movement created conditions for women's involvement in the national movement. Gandhi's arrest at the time of the Civil Disobedience Movement led to Mrs. Sarojini Naidu assuming a leading role and this brought an increasingly large number of women into organized political activities. Women picketed liquor and foreign cloth shops, faced lathis and courted arrest. Organized Underground Movements also emerged among women under the leadership of women like Sucheta Kriplani, Aruna Asif Ali and Usha Mehta.⁴⁵ A women's corps under Subhash Chandra Bose was also organized by Col. Lakshmi.⁴⁶

44. Women's Indian Association published a letter expressing women's feelings. It read, "Not with standing that Mr. Gandhi has refused to allow women to participate in his historic march in the Independence-campaign because he explains they 'would complicate' things, women in different parts of India are not satisfied with the explanation and have protested against their arbitrary exclusion. ..Gandhiji has kept the care of his Ashram entirely to women. This division of sexes in an non-violent campaign seems to us unnatural, and against all the awakened consciousness of modern womanhood. In these stirring critical days for India's destiny there should be no watertight compartments of service. Women asked that no conferences, congresses or commissions should be held without the presence on them of women. Similarly women must ask that no marches, no imprisonment, no demonstration organized for the welfare of India should prohibit women from a share in them. (quoted in Cousins, *Op. cit.*, p.72.)

45. See UNESCO, Status of Women in South Asia, New Delhi, 1954.

46. Ibid.

Gandhi was himself greatly impressed by the great sacrifices made by women in the cause of Indian freedom. He wrote in Young India, though his tone was patronizing and betrays a typical male attitude,

The women in India tore down the mandal and came forward to work for the nation. They saw that the country demanded something more than looking after their homes. They manufactured contraband salt, they picketed foreign cloth shops and liquor shops and tried to wean the seller and customer both They marched to jails and sustained lathi-blows as few men did.⁴⁷

The contribution of women to the national movement was considerable. As O'Malley noted subsequently, 'within a matter of years, women passed from apathetic indifference to eager activity and ~~active~~ awareness of their responsibilities as citizens.⁴⁸ The chief factor for this transformation seems to be the nature of the movement itself. The movement was essentially pacifist in character though it was frequently marked by violence. The pacifist character was likely in any case to appeal to the sensibilities of women. Thus, women did not have to participate in any activity which did not conform to their traditional roles and images.

The national movement served as a rallying point for women, but we do not know what sections of the women's population were actually drawn into the movement. Nevertheless, it is certain that the position of women was not particularly influential. Women

47. Young India, Jan. 14, 1932.

48. O'Malley, op. cit. p. 475.

were, by and large, deployed to stage satyagrahas, but the leadership of the movement remained with men. As a matter of fact, if a systematic study of the role of women in the national movement were made, it may actually be found that women who became involved in the national movement, however remotely, did so at the instance and encouragement of their husbands and their role and pattern of participation remained dependent on the latter.

POLITICS AND WOMEN IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

The Constitution of free India introduced the system of universal adult franchise as the basis for the governance of the country. This was a radical step. It terminated the inequality which had existed previously and accorded equal political rights to all men and women irrespective of other qualifications. The actual realisation of this constitutional equality is a more open question, however. It requires to be investigated for a satisfactory appreciation of the political status of women in contemporary Indian society. Pending systematic studies, the only data to go by are the official statistics compiled by the Election Commission and similar other official agencies and the fragmentary information provided by some empirical studies.

Electoral Participation

The question of women's participation in the political life of contemporary Indian society can be discussed fruitfully at two levels: awareness and assertion of political rights and responsibilities and exercise of power. For assessing the role and status of

of women at the first level, we need, firstly, to examine the extent of participation of women in different political activities, such as voting, campaigning, party identification, party membership, decision making, etc., and, secondly, to evaluate the extent of autonomy with which they exercise their political rights. As has been indicated earlier, the data required for a realistic estimate of this dimension are not available. The electoral studies carried out by political scientists during the last twenty years have either neglected women completely or dealt with their political participation very sketchily. Even official statistics are incomplete and inadequate. For one thing, the data relate only to participation of women as voters and candidates. Other areas of political activity which could provide a useful clue to their role are not available. Secondly, the data date from the second general election. They are not available for the first general election.

Table VI presents the turnout among women voters during the last three general elections for which data are available. The picture that emerges from this Table would appear to be very encouraging. It shows that women's participation in electoral politics is considerable and has been increasing steadily. While barely 36.77 percent women exercised their franchise in 1957, their percentage increased to 47 in 1962 and 56 in 1967. Electoral participation by Indian women, thus, registered a rise of over 17 percentage points during a decade. The increase in the turnout of male voters during the same period was of 11 percentage points.

TABLE VI

VOTERS PARTICIPATIONS BY MEN & WOMEN IN THE LOK SABHA ELECTIONS

| STATE | 1957 | | 1962 | | 1967 | |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | MEN | WOMEN | MEN | WOMEN | MEN | WOMEN |
| 1. Andhra Pradesh | 50.03 | 37.56 | 69.03 | 60.34 | 72.08 | 65.49 |
| 2. Assam | 51.80 | 39.31 | 51.50 | 37.23 | 66.50 | 50.83 |
| 3. Bihar | 49.99 | 34.43 | 55.39 | 32.86 | 61.28 | 40.74 |
| 4. Gujrat | 61.64 | 49.26 | 63.39 | 52.07 | 69.19 | 58.17 |
| 5. Kerala | 68.64 | 64.61 | 74.10 | 67.08 | 77.13 | 74.20 |
| 6. Madhya Pradesh | 52.22 | 23.03 | 60.36 | 38.90 | 64.35 | 74.20 |
| 7. Madras | 54.60 | 43.73 | 73.07 | 64.55 | 79.23 | 74.94 |
| 8. Maharashtra | 61.64 | 49.27 | 66.02 | 54.29 | 68.82 | 60.45 |
| 9. Mysore | 60.20 | 46.00 | 65.18 | 63.07 | 67.36 | 58.34 |
| 10. Orissa | 49.98 | 21.82 | 33.07 | 13.81 | 53.56 | 33.05 |
| 11. Punjab | 59.13 | 49.98 | 65.90 | 58.13 | 73.44 | 68.43 |
| 12. Rajasthan | 48.50 | 28.50 | 62.63 | 41.35 | 64.96 | 51.02 |
| 13. Uttar Pradesh | 57.42 | 36.36 | 59.42 | 39.46 | 59.27 | 48.96 |
| 14. West Bengal | 57.49 | 37.31 | 61.98 | 47.62 | 70.88 | 60.15 |
| 15. J & K | - | - | - | - | 57.25 | 32.08 |
| 16. Haryana | - | - | - | - | 75.41 | 69.44 |
| 17. Delhi | 57.57 | 58.18 | 65.82 | 71.71 | 68.91 | 70.85 |
| 18. Himachal Pradesh | 50.29 | 22.93 | 43.68 | 22.40 | 47.97 | 40.05 |
| 19. Manipur | 58.78 | 46.89 | 66.27 | 64.44 | 68.73 | 65.80 |
| 20. Tripura | 68.45 | 60.43 | 73.33 | 61.77 | 76.45 | 72.98 |
| 21. Andaman & Nicobar | - | - | - | - | 79.22 | 76.77 |
| 22. Chandigarh | - | - | - | - | 65.45 | 65.28 |
| 23. Dader & Nagar | - | - | - | - | 80.85 | 76.55 |
| 24. Goa Daman & Diu | - | - | - | - | 69.35 | 67.43 |
| 25. Laccadive Minicoy & Arundive Islands | - | - | - | - | 78.27 | 86.16 |
| 26. TOTAL | 55.75 | 38.77 | 62.05 | 46.63 | 66.73 | 55.48 |

Source: Reports of the Indian Election Commission for the respective years.

This encouraging aspect is again discernible when the figures for male and female voter turnout are compared. Although there exists a gap in the turnout of male and female voters, this gap is very marginal. Moreover, it has been getting reduced at every successive election.⁴⁹ The difference in the turnout of voters belonging to two sexes was of the order of 17 percentage points in 1957. It came down to 15 percentage points in 1962 and 11 percent in 1967.

A cross national comparison of the difference in the turnout of male and female voters shows that the position of Indian women is relatively favourable as compared to the position of women in other Asian countries. As a matter of fact, their participation is closely comparable to the female voter turnout in Western democratic countries. Figures for Great Britain, U.S.A. and Canada, where women won franchise before the First World War, show that turnout among female voters tends to be ten percent lower than the turnout among men. This gap increases from 15 to 25 percent in some Asian countries. Japan has recorded 15 percent lower turnout among women voters, while the difference in the turnout of male and female voters in the Philippines, Ceylon and Pakistan has been found to range between 18 and 25 percentage points. This comparison would tend to show that so far as electoral participation is concerned, the part played by Indian women is considerably greater than that of ~~most~~ their other Asian ~~representative~~ sisters. It is closer to the performance of women in some of the Western countries.⁵⁰

49. The figures of 1971 general elections, however, show that this gap has widened.

50. Pralash Gender, 'Women Members in Lok Sabha' *Journal of Parliamentary Information*. (19) 1, 1973, pp. 53-74.

It would be erroneous to read too much in the statistics relating to electoral participation or to conclude therefrom that women enjoy an almost equal status with men in electoral decision-making. Firstly, electoral participation is the lowest, and also the simplest, form of political participation.⁵¹ It is possible that the periodic nature of elections and their novelty contribute to the greater turnout of women during elections. Equally, it is possible that women may engage in this form of political activity without any adequate awareness of its significance. It would, therefore, be necessary to examine the part played by women at other levels of political participation and in other activities to gauge the degree of their consciousness and awareness of the political significance of their rights if we wish to assess their role as citizens and electors.

There is little systematic data on the extent and degree of political participation by women in activities beyond voting. The little evidence that exist suggest that the extent of participation of women in political activities other than voting is very low. They are not interested in politics and for most of them political activity ends with the ballot box. They do not discuss politics among themselves and do not attend political meetings. Nor do they involve themselves in activities designed to influence political decisions. A survey conducted by the Indian Institute of Public Opinion concluded that political interest among women was low. Four times as many men as women

51. For a discussion of the forms and hierarchy of political participation see N. Rush and P. Althoff, Introduction to Political Sociology, 1971, London, pp. 75-113.

were interested in politics, attended meetings and tried to influence decisions and about three times as many men as women discussed politics.⁵² Table VII presents the findings of the survey. Similar conclusion was drawn by a recent study of urban voters.⁵³

TABLE VII

POLITICAL INTEREST BY SEX

| | MALE | FEMALE | DIFFERENCE |
|--|------|--------|------------|
| <u>% attend meetings</u> | | | |
| Dahli Area Study | 39% | 10% | -29% |
| Low and Order Poll | 43% | 11% | -22% |
| <u>% take interest in politics</u> | | | |
| 1961 nat'l poll | 25% | 8% | -17% |
| <u>% discuss politics</u> | | | |
| Dahli area Study | 21% | 5% | -16% |
| <u>% participate in activities to affect decisions</u> | | | |
| 1967 nat'l poll | 19% | 5% | -14% |
| 1964 nat'l poll | 8% | 3% | -5% |

Source: M.L. Goel, 'Sex Relevancy for Political Participation in India', Political Scientists, July-Dec. 1969.

52. The number of Women respondents covered by this survey was so low that it would be quite misleading to draw any definitive conclusions from it. ~~See details etc.~~

53. Bhambri and Varma, op. cit., pp. 73-99.

Quantitative data on the involvement of women in activities like campaigning and canvassing for candidates are lacking. Such evidence as is available, nevertheless, clearly shows that the number of women who engage in activities such as campaigning is low. So also is their party identification. Few women become members of political parties, and even these few have negligible participation at higher organizational levels. Except for a few outstanding leaders in the national parties, they have only local as opposed to a national or even regional importance in party hierarchies.⁵⁴

There have been few studies also of the extent to which women are able to see the efficacy of their participation in elections and the dynamics of electoral choice. This makes it difficult for us to gauge the degree of political consciousness and awareness among women and their appreciation of the significance of their political rights. All the evidence that we have on this question is largely impressionistic and does not attribute a high level of consciousness to women.⁵⁵ On the contrary, it suggests that women participate in electoral politics more out of a sense of newness and

54. See Menon, 'Political Rights of Women in India', in UNESCO, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

55. A survey carried out by some journalists in Delhi at the time of the Fifth Lok Sabha elections showed that women did not usually possess strong party identification and voted out of non-ideological considerations. It revealed that most of the women respondents interviewed favoured Mrs. Gandhi. However, their preference for her was not based on ideological considerations or on her being a leader of the Congress Party. It was based on her being Nehru's daughter. See Shiv Lal, Indian Elections since Independence, Delhi, 1972, pp. 74-87.

periodic nature of elections than a clear perception of its significance. Several observers of the first general election had noted that women took polling as a festive occasion. In villages especially, election was considered to be a festival when 'women put on their best clothes and ... (went) to the polling booths in groups singing songs.'⁵⁶ Periodic exposure to political events, as indeed Ramashray Roy⁵⁷ has noted, has probably produced a better appreciation of the vote. However, there is little objective data to this effect. Hansa, who has made a study of political participation and socialization in Bangalore city recently, found that the large majority of women were politically apathetic. For these dormant women, interest in politics ended at the polling booth.⁵⁸

There are also indications in the literature that women do not reach their political choices independently. Even if some scholars and politicians argue that women are showing a growing maturity in exercising their franchise,⁵⁹ and the growing concern shown by political parties to mobilise women voters certainly reflects this. Studies of the dynamics of electoral decision-making

56. Shiv Lal, op. cit., p. 85.

57. Ramashray Roy, op. cit., p. 117.

58. Personal communication.

59. Almost all the major political parties now have their women's wings, women workers are pressed into service to mobilise women voters during election time. See Shiv Lal, op. cit., p. 76-77.

suggest that women are generally amenable to external influence in arriving at their electoral choices. It is just as easy for them not to vote, and if they vote at all, they do so according to the political orientations of their husbands or some other authority figure in their families. Contrary to the situation obtaining among men, who either vote as individuals or as members of special interest groups, women follow the class and social interests of their husbands or fathers rather than their own interests as a group.⁶⁰ 'Because of the nature of sex roles and authority structure in the family,' writes Ahmad, 'they (women) find it almost natural to follow the lead of a male 'authority figure' when they go to the polls.'⁶¹ This point has also been recently confirmed by Sirsalkar's study of electoral behaviour in Poona city.⁶² He has found the phenomenon of 'uni-family' vote according to which all the members of the family vote according to the dictates of the head of the family.

This discussion of electoral participation suggests that the role played by women in the area of elections and exercise of franchise continues to be limited. This limitation does not relate so much to the actual exercise of the right of franchise. As the discussion of electoral figures has indicated, women turn out to exercise their right of franchise in considerable numbers. The limitation relates to

60. This is well documented finding from studies carried out in the U.S.A.

61. Intiaz Ahmad, 'Women in Politics', in Devaki Jain (ed.), *op. cit.*

62. Sirsalkar, *op. cit.*, p. 306-311.

the level and extent of participation and the degree of autonomy enjoyed by them in the exercise of their rights. Firstly, the role of women at higher levels of political participation continues to be limited. Secondly, ^{they} also seem to be amenable to male dominance in the exercise of their political rights and the absence of cross pressures discourages their political independence.⁶³

Women As Decision-Makers

The position would seem to be different at decision-making levels. The country is at present headed by a woman Prime Minister and several states have been led by women Chief Ministers and Governors. Many prominent women have also held ministerial offices both in the centre and the states. Even the U.N. General Assembly has been once presided over by an Indian woman. These cases of prominent Indian women in public life would seem to indicate that women occupy an influential position in the power structure and the decision-making process.

Conclusions based on a consideration of a handful of prominent women in the country's public life are nevertheless likely to be both erroneous and misleading. We must undertake a detailed examination of the recruitment, role and influence of women in the various legislative and decision making bodies before we can hope to generalise about the role and position of women in the decision-making process and the

63. A high degree of political participation, political scientists have concluded, depends at least in part, on the presence of group pressures emphasizing the importance of the ballot, and the absence of cross-pressures discouraging political independence. Each variable seems to work against women's participation in public life. See Ahmad, op. cit. p. 17.

exercise of political power.

The role of women at decision making levels may best be understood by looking at their participation in legislative and executive functions, the degree of influence exerted by them, and the issues and considerations that engage their attention. Table VIII presents the number and percentage of women candidates and women elected to the Lok Sabha and the Legislative Assemblies during the last five general elections and mid-term polls. The figure of women candidates who contest election is highly discouraging. It shows that a very small number of women contest elections to legislative bodies. Women contestants for elections to the Lok Sabha have never formed more than 3 percent of the total candidates. Though their number has been increasing, their percentage remains more or less the same. It was 2 per cent in 1951, 3 per cent in 1957, 3.4 per cent in 1962, 2.5 per cent in 1967 and 3 per cent in 1971.⁶⁴ For women contesting elections to the Legislative Assemblies the percentage was 3 in 1957 and 1962. It declined to 2 per cent in the 1967 and subsequent elections.

Much the same pattern is found to replicate itself at the level of elected candidates. The maximum number of women members in any one term of the Lok Sabha has not exceeded 34. Moreover, what is worse, the percentage of women member is on the decline.⁶⁵ From

64. Prakash Chandra, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

65. *Ibid.*

TABLE VIII ✓

WOMEN CANDIDATES AND WOMEN ELECTED TO THE LOK SABHA
AND LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLIES - 1951-1971.

| Year | LOK SABHA | | | | LEG. ASSEMBLIES | | | |
|------|------------|--------------------------|---------|--------------------------|-----------------|------|---------|------|
| | Candidates | | Elected | | Candidates | | Elected | |
| | No. | %age of total candidates | No. | %age of total candidates | No. | %age | No. | %age |
| 1951 | 43 | 2 | 19 | 3 | 151 | 1 | 61 | 2 |
| 1957 | 45 | 3 | 27 | 3 | 341 | 3 | 192 | 7 |
| 1962 | 88 | 3 | 33 | 6 | 331 | 3 | 138 | 5 |
| 1967 | 67 | 3 | 30 | 6 | 252 | 2 | 99 | 5 |
| 1969 | - | - | - | - | 149 | 2 | 37 | 3 |
| 1970 | - | - | - | - | 9 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 1971 | 85 | 3 | 31 | 4 | 46 | 2 | 11 | 2 |

Source: S. Saraswati, 'Political Status of Women in India', Paper prepared for the Status of Women Committee, New Delhi, 1974 (mimeographed).

6.7 per cent in the third Lok Sabha, it has come down to 5.9 per cent in the fourth and 4.2 per cent in the fifth Lok Sabha.

This low percentage of women in the Lok Sabha is not unique to India. The situation is similar in western democratic countries. For instance, women form only 4.1 per cent of the total membership of the British House of Commons, 2.3 per cent of the American House of Representatives, and 1.6 per cent of the French National Assembly. Canada's situation is worse. It has had only 18 women members in the popular house of its national legislature since enfranchisement. Currently, there is only one woman member in the Canadian legislature. Thus, India is among many other democratic countries of the world where women fail to get representation proportionate to their share in the population.⁶⁶

The reasons for the small number of women candidates and women elected to legislative bodies are difficult to account. There have been no systematic studies of the dynamics of selection of candidates by political parties⁶⁷ that could be relied upon to identify the reasons why so few women are successful in securing nominations for elections.⁶⁸

66. See C.A. Nete, Changing Position of Women in Post-Independence India, Bombay, 1969, pp. 272-280.

67. Ramakrishna Roy's work on the selection of Congress candidates is about the only work on this important subject. However, Roy does not provide any information on this dimension.

68. Shiv Lal (op. cit., pp. 77-80) has attributed the low proportion of women who are able to get party tickets to the discriminatory orientations of the party leaders. However, the allegation cannot be tested as there are no data to indicate this.

However, three broad explanations would appear quite plausible. Firstly, it seems that women are unable to mobilise the pressures that are critical for securing a party ticket. This is best exemplified by the Congress itself. Since 1962 onwards, it has been a proclaimed policy of the Congress Party to allot at least 15 per cent tickets to women candidates for elections to the Lok Sabha and the Legislative Assemblies. Even so, the total number of tickets actually allotted by the party to women has never exceeded 7 per cent.⁶⁹ Presumably, this discrepancy owes itself to the fact that there was keen competition for available elective positions and women performed poorly in this tug of war.

A second explanation may be the process of elections itself. Elections are a costly affair and they require intensive campaigning over an extended area within a short time. It is plausible that party leaders, who are themselves males, do not look upon women as capable of withstanding the strains of electioneering. Some indications of this can be found in the fact that women candidates are commonly allotted tickets to contest elections to the legislative bodies from urban constituencies.

The third, and perhaps a more important, factor is the general social backwardness among women. Because of it, women tend to accept the traditional role division according to which their proper

69. The number of women who apply for party tickets has been going up, but the number of women who are able to get party tickets remains fixed. However, the number of women candidates contesting elections as Independents has been rising steadily.

place is within the house-hold. Public life is still eschewed. Given this psychological restraint, only a relatively small number of highly self-conscious women, or those who enjoy the support of their husband or significant ~~kind~~ others, may be willing to transcend the social norms and stake claims to a political career.

There have been no studies of the personality orientations of the politically active women as well as the factors that propel them to enter politics as a career. It is, therefore, quite difficult to assess the relevance of factors that are critical to the entry of women into the field of politics. However, some idea can be formed about this dimension by looking at the career profiles and social background of candidates elected to the Lok Sabha.

Table IX presents a consolidated analysis of the educational, social, economic and occupational background of women members of the Lok Sabha since its inception. It helps to highlight some of the social traits and characteristics of women politicians. Firstly, it shows that almost all of them have had some amount of education. Two thirds of them have had education upto school level and seven per cent had studied privately. Of the educated women, a large number of them (16 per cent) had received their education in foreign countries like U.S.A., U.K., Canada and other European countries. Although the number of foreign educated women politicians in the Lok Sabha has been gradually declining over the years, the proportion of foreign trained politicians in the legislatures continues to be quite significant.

TABLE IX

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF WOMEN MEMBERS OF LOK SABHA 1952-1971I Education

| <u>School</u> | <u>College</u> | <u>Private</u> | <u>N.A.</u> |
|---------------|----------------|----------------|-------------|
| 14% | 66% | 7% | 13% |

II Foreign Education

| <u>U.K./Europe</u> | <u>U.S.A./Canada</u> | <u>Asian Countries</u> | <u>N.A.</u> |
|--------------------|----------------------|------------------------|-------------|
| 12.8% | 3% | - | 84.2% |

III Rural Urban Composition

| <u>Village</u> | <u>Town (with a population upto 10,000)</u> | <u>City (with a Population over 10,000)</u> | <u>N.A.</u> |
|----------------|---|---|-------------|
| 7.6% | 36% | 48.6% | 7.8% |

IV Class Structure

| <u>Working</u> | <u>Middle</u> | <u>Upper</u> | <u>N.A.</u> |
|----------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|
| 5.4% | 74.4% | 17.8% | 2.4% |

V Professional Background

| <u>Agriculture</u> | <u>Service</u> | <u>Journalism</u> | <u>Medicine</u> |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| 13.4 | 3.8 | 1.8 | 2.6 |
| <u>Political & Social Workers</u> | <u>Teaching</u> | <u>Ex-ruling class</u> | <u>N.A.</u> |
| 43.4 | 13.0 | 12.6 | 4.6 |

Source: Prakash Chandra, 'Women Members in Lok Sabha', Journal of Parliamentary Information 19(1), 1973, pp. 53-68.

The social and economic profiles of the women members of the Lok Sabha also suggests that women politicians generally belong to the privileged strata of society. Most of them belong to the upper middle and upper classes (74 per cent and 18 per cent respectively). Women belonging to the working class account for a small percentage (5.4 per cent). Over the years, the percentage of women politicians belonging to upper and upper middle classes has been declining gradually. Nevertheless, their hold over political offices is quite easily distinguishable from the figures on their class affiliations. Moreover, most of them come from urban background. The percentage of women who belong to rural areas is as low as 7 percent. And even these women, though born in rural area, have long back settled in the urban centres. They do not have such link with their birth places. The percentage of women who belong to the towns and cities is 36 and 49 respectively.

Professionally, all women have followed careers before they were elected to the Lok Sabha. Political and social workers form half of the total women members. They are followed by teachers, journalists and doctors who constitute 18 percent of the total members. Another 13 percent women had followed agriculture as a profession and 12.6 percent women belonged to the ex-ruling families. The fact that all women politicians are working women suggests that they were able to outgrow the constraints of their

traditional role as housewives before their entry into politics.⁷⁰

This brief discussion of the social background of women members of the Lok Sabha clearly suggests that a woman politician has to command far greater resources in terms of family background, education and career orientation than the average woman. As a matter of fact, a comparison of these women politicians with male politicians tends to show that they are far more closely comparable to men in terms of command over skills and opportunities than women.⁷¹ It is to be expected that the proportion of women having access to skills and opportunities would be quite small.

Position and Influence

The position and influence of women in the decision making process can be analysed at two levels, collective and individual. Collectively, women do not seem to constitute any considerable force at decision-making levels. As the figures on women elected to the Legislative Assemblies have already shown, their number and proportion is so small that they cannot be expected to represent any very massive political force. Moreover, even this small number

70. For an elaboration of this see F.T. Colon, 'The Elected Woman', Social Studies 6, 1968, pp. 256-261, and Rosemonde Ramsay Boyd, 'Women and Politics in the USA and Canada', Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 375, 1968, pp. 52-57.

71. For a discussion of the social background of the male members of the Lok Sabha see Ratna Datta, 'The Party Representatives in the Fourth Lok Sabha', Economic and Political Weekly, Annual Number, 1969 and Satish Arora, 'Social Background of the Fifth Lok Sabha', Economics and Political Weekly, special number, 1974.

of women M.Ps is divided into a number of parties and owe their allegiance to the ideology of their parties. They really cannot be expected to combine together for any common objectives.⁷²

On the individual plane, the influence exerted or power enjoyed by a woman politician is more difficult to assess. Some indications of this dimension may be provided by the positions held by them in the executive and decision-making roles. Looking at the executive and decision-making positions held by women, we would find that, with a few exceptions, women rarely hold important political or executive offices. They are generally not able to secure any position higher than a deputy-minister. Furthermore, the portfolios they hold are usually of limited significance. They are appointed to departments which largely concentrate on matters falling within their traditional roles, that is, on educational and social policy and family matters.⁷³

Political efficacy of a politician eventually depends upon gradually building up a sphere of influence which can be relied upon to advance in the power hierarchy. There have been no studies of the political influence of women either in policy making or in the

72. Studies of the pattern of participation of women MPs in the debates of the Parliament could show the extent to which they were able to combine together for certain issues of common concern to them. Given the principle of party discipline, it would nevertheless seem that such cooperation would be greatly limited.

73. This pattern has been found in other countries as well. See, for instance, Amy E. Warner, 'Women in Congress: 1917-1964', Western Political Quarterly 19(1), 1966, pp. 16-30.

power hierarchy. Some impressionistic accounts, however, suggest that women politicians are unable either to establish their personal political influence or to affect policy making.⁷⁴ They tend quite often to be amenable to the pressures of male leaders, and a common tendency for them is to depend upon male leaders.

The reasons for the generally dependent political orientations of women even at decision-making levels require systematic study. However, at least two plausible explanations can be indicated provisionally. The first is the process of their recruitment to political offices. The pattern of recruitment of women to politics is different from that of men. They enter politics either through widow succession, or as a standing candidate for their husbands or fathers or are appointed to political offices by male political leaders. The indirect data on social and political linkages of women clearly shows this. Three fourths of women politicians are daughters and wives of prominent politicians who have or had themselves occupied political offices at some time. The remaining one fourth are those who had the backing of the party bosses. Since women enter politics mainly through the support of men rather than through their own sustained political interest and effort, it is to be expected that they would follow the lead of men in political matters. Secondly, there are also few opportunities for women to build their personal spheres of influences as they stay in office for relatively brief periods.

74. See Hata, *op. cit.*, 267.

CONCLUSIONS

This essay has been concerned with an assessment of the role and position of women in Indian politics. Let us now recapitulate some of the main findings suggested by this discussion.

The role and contribution of women to the field of politics has been relatively restricted throughout. Perhaps during the early Vedic period women played an equal role with men in politics, but thereafter this equality underwent a gradual process of decline. Women came to be regarded as inferior to men and their participation in public life came to be greatly curtailed. They were denied education, economic independence and public contact which would have been essential pre-conditions for their participation in public life.

The establishment of British rule during the nineteenth century opened the way for contact with the west. Under the influence of western ideals of liberty, equality and democracy, a new consciousness developed among Indians. Some Indian reformers took the initiative to reform the social conditions of Indian women. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the liberation movement of Indian women took an organized form and its leadership passed on to a number of educated women. As a result of the efforts of these women, the franchise movement of Indian women was launched. The movement was very short lived and women were able to achieve their political rights very easily. The base of the legal and political equality of women further broadened with independence when the principle of universal

adult franchise was incorporated into the constitution of new India.

Once women achieved their political rights, it was expected that they would automatically come to play effective role in the field of politics. However, an evaluation of their role in pre-independence and post-independence periods shows that this anticipation was misplaced.

During the pre-independence period, women could not play any significant role in electoral politics. The terms of franchise excluded the majority of women from the arena of politics and even the few highly placed women did not show much enthusiasm to exercise their rights. Even those women who were elected to various legislative bodies could not achieve much because of their very small number in legislatures.

Women joined the national movement very late. Until 1930, very few women showed any concern towards the movement or participated in it directly. Under the leadership of Gandhi, women were mobilized in large numbers. Nevertheless their role was largely supportive and they did not play any leadership role in the movement.

Attainment of independence and the acceptance of the principle of universal adult franchise did not make any difference in the quantity or quality of women's political role. Quantitative data shows, firstly, that the participation of women is low in all political activities, and, secondly, that there exists a gap in the

number and percentage of men and women who participate. Though this gap is marginal at the level of voting, it becomes wider in case of higher political activities such as campaigning, party identification, party membership, etc. It becomes widest in case of decision-making where sixteen times as many men as women participate.

The political activity of women not only differs in quantity from the activity of men. There are also difference of quality in the roles and status of the two sexes. It has been observed that in every act of political participation be it the lowest level of voting or the highest level of decision-making, the tendency of a woman is to follow the lead of men. She votes according to the preferences of her father or husband; she is recruited to the positions of power through the support of males, and while in power she takes policy decisions on the advice of male party bosses. In short, she is dependent upon men in every political activity. This phenomenon is not unique to India. There is evidence to show that the same is the pattern in other countries of the world. It, nevertheless, reflects the relatively inferior status of women in the political sphere. Politics is still the domain of men and women do not play any effective part in it.

The explanation for the generally apathetic political orientation of women and their tendency of acquiescence to the judgement of males has generally been found in the temperamental and physiological differences between men and women. The argument has never been explicitly formulated in India, but it runs through a great deal of the debate. What is usually implied is that, because

of temperamental and physiological reasons, women are not capable of engaging in political activities. Consequently, they should be restricted from equal participation in public life.⁷⁵

Perhaps the point about physiological and temperamental differences does have a certain biological validity (though this has not been established),⁷⁶ it is difficult to see how these can alone account for the differential access of men and women to politics and power. Even when men themselves suffer from some of these disabilities, they are not denied access to power, while women are debarred from such participation. Under the circumstances, the only plausible answer seems to be that the differential position of men and women in the power structure is an aspect of social stratification.⁷⁷

75. Elsewhere the argument against women being accorded responsible leadership positions has been well articulated. For instance, Harris writes, 'It is often argued that menstruation severely impinges upon the capacity of women to make rational decisions under stress and hence that the exclusion of women from positions of industrial, government, or military leadership continue to be based upon a realistic adjustment to biological givens' (Merwin Harris, Culture, Man and Nature, New York, 1971, p. 583).
76. As a matter of fact, anthropological evidence shows that the association between physiological conditions like menstruation and irritability are not necessarily a biological given. What is given is a wide ~~to a wide~~ variation in psychological states associated with menstruation among women in different cultures. The widespread folklore about the physiological and biological disabilities of women is itself at least in part a product of male supremacy rather than one of its causes. (See Harris, op. cit., p. 584, and Margaret Mead, Sex and Temperament in Three Societies, New York, 1950).
77. cf. Harris, 'The political and economic subordination of women to men... makes sense only as a stratification phenomenon - it is adaptive only for the superordinate strata. There is considerable truth therefore in the claim advanced by numerous women's liberation groups that women constitute an exploited class' (op. cit., p. 584). Millet has put forth this same point quite forcefully. See Kate Millet, Sexual Politics, New York, 1970.

Indian society is patriarchal in character. One of the features of such a society is that father is the head of the family hierarchy and dominates over the whole household including the wife. His position and occupational success determines the behaviour of every individual in the family. There is segregation of roles between men and women and certain roles come to be regarded as typically 'male' and others as typically 'female'. Men is expected to maintain the family, women is expected to look after the family; he is to decide in all matters, she is to follow his lead; the man's domain is outside the family, women's domain is within the household. The natural inferiority of women is the central crux of this role differentiation in a patriarchal society.

Since contemporary Indian society is basically patriarchal, the conception of the role division and the inferiority of women are still relevant. It is the socialization process which helps in maintaining these concepts and in transmitting them from generation to generation. Socialization refers to the process through which people are trained to acquire the knowledge skills and dispositions of their expected roles in society.⁷⁸ Since women are assigned roles that are different from those of men, they are socialized in a different way. As they are expected to take up the job of bringing up the family, whatever they are taught is geared to the ultimate

⁷⁸, For a detailed discussion of the concept of political socialization, see Herbert H. Hyman Political Socialization: A Study in the Psychology of Political Behaviour, New York, 1969.

object of being good housewives. Moreover right from their childhood, they are trained in such a way that they come to consider themselves as inferior to men and do not question their dominance.

So far as political participation is concerned, four results follow from this process of socialization. Firstly, women come to accept the traditional role division and do not want to participate in public life. Since the ideal before them right from their childhood, is of being good housewives, their fondest wish is to get married. As a matter of fact, they consider it to be a matter of prestige to have good husbands as, according to their beliefs, their position in society depends upon their husbands. Once they are married and beget children, they do not mind leaving their education, profession or occupation. They do not want to leave their houses and join public life since they think that politics is the domain of men exclusively and that they should not meddle with it. Very few women can transcend these beliefs.

Secondly, women form a perception of themselves as being inferior to men and thus of being incapable of taking independent decisions. The idea of inferiority is so deep rooted in their minds that they completely depend upon men and follow their lead in most matters including politics. Like any other social activity, they find it almost natural to participate in politics according to the political preferences of men. Participation according to their own opinions requires a break from their conventional break from their

roles and few women are prepared to risk it.

Thirdly, it is not only women who develop notions about their subordinate roles in the society, but society also expects them to takeover these roles. Marriage and family life are considered to be of utmost importance for women. Politics as a career is considered unwomenly and women in public life are looked down upon. People do not hesitate in showing their resentment against women politicians. For instance, in the early days of Mrs. Gandhi's Prime-Ministership, 'petticoat government' was held responsible for everything that went wrong in the country.

Fourthly, women are socialized in such a way that they do not develop much interest in politics. Firstly, they lag behind in education which is very important in exposing them to the wider world and means of political communication. Secondly, they are so much absorbed in family life that they do not get much time and leisure to be interested in politics.

The significance of socialization and role structure for political participation and involvement among women could be gauged from the study of women who are oriented towards a more male-oriented role. Unfortunately, few studies have been undertaken on this dimension in India. However, Palombra's comparative cross-national study showed that women who played a dominant economic role tended to be more politically active.⁷⁹ Our evidence has also shown that women

79. J. la Palombra, Anathy and Participation, New York, 1971.

who participated in public life tend almost in every detail to be more like men than their own sisters. Evidently, therefore, the passive political orientations of women are due to their socialization and role structure and these orientations stand little chance of change unless the socialization process and role structure themselves undergo change.

Perhaps, underneath the apparent stability and continuity of Indian social structure, social changes are occurring and these changes may eventually produce changes in the roles and position of women. For instance, it is likely that the rise in the proportion of women in the work-force may eventually produce changes in socialization patterns and role structure of society. However, this is a point that can only be gauged from studies focussing on women.

Our contention initially was that the study of women has been neglected in India and little information is available about them. Under the circumstances, our conclusions are at best tentative. If we are to understand the political role and status of women, we would require a number of studies focussing on women. Let us in conclusion enumerate some of the areas in which studies are needed.

Firstly, studies should be undertaken to study the patterns of political participation among women. Such studies should not only elicit data on participation patterns, but should also try to relate sex to socio-economic variables to see if there are differences among women as a result of their differential social location. Literacy,

urbanisation and occupation among women and their relation to political participation should be studied.

Secondly, studies should be undertaken on the patterns of recruitment to the political system. Such studies should try to identify the factors that motivate women to join politics and the avenues through which women politicians are recruited to political offices. Studies should also be organized on the pressures through which women are able to involve these pressures in their favour. The detriments and obstacles to women getting adequate representation may, thus, be highlighted.

Thirdly, studies should be undertaken to study the effect of socialization on women's political participation. Simultaneously, these studies should explore the structure of family relationships. It is possible that the structure of family relationships, encouragement by parents or egalitarian ethos of the family may off-set socialization orientations.

Finally, studies of the issues and problems raised by women in legislative organs may be undertaken. Such studies will show how far women are able to fight for collective issues.

One of the arguments against discussing women and covering them in their studies among political scientists has been that the political apathy of women is well-known. Even if the picture of women's political involvement broadly conforms to the picture that

our discussion has portrayed, there is no reason to exclude them from study altogether. Studies of women would be indispensable for understanding the effects of the democratic process on women and the long term shifts that may be occurring in their behaviour as a consequent of it. Unless one takes the position that there are no long term shifts, the study of women would seem imperative. Few would seriously argue that women are not being affected by the politicization and democratization of Indian Society.

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Explanatory Note: The literature on women is quite extensive. The object of this bibliography is not to provide a complete list of all works on women. It seeks merely to present a selection of some of the works. The selection has been based on their relevance for the subjects and topics discussed in the preceding essay.

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