

EVA STALIN IAS ACADEMY - BEST IAS COACHING IN CHENNAI

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Women want change, society needs change

The 17th edition of the Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum (published on June 20, 2023), based on data from 146 countries, has concluded that at the current rate of progress, it will take 131 years to close the global gender gap; it is 149 years in populous South Asian countries including India.

Reservation is the most effective form of affirmative action and equity is the first step to equality. That it leads to inefficiency or incompetency is simply making excuses for not rendering tightly guarded spaces to ousted classes. I strongly contend that women are not inferior to men. Incompetencies, even if they arise, are short term, and are removed soon after opportunity for skill building is made available.

A very astute person once asked me whether we want women to fight women. The answer is 'no'. What women want is a level playing field where the factor of gender which is completely irrelevant but looms large, is removed from the equation.

The basic premise of advocates against reservation is that it will bring down competence. Alas, this is a completely misplaced notion as statistics show that women perform much better than men in academics, more women graduate from colleges than men, and more women enter the workforce than men. In contrast to this trend, the number of women sharply spirals downwards in leadership positions not because of their incompetence, but because of the hegemony of men.

A fresh start

The inauguration of parliamentary business in September 2023 in the new Parliament building also gave a fresh start to the aspirations of Indian citizens with the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill. After much delay, the Constitution (One Hundred Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2023, popularly known as the Women's Reservation Bill, 2023 became a rare piece of legislation in independent India to be cleared overwhelmingly by both Houses. It is indeed a ground-breaking event. While India's founding fathers ensured that India was early to adopt universal adult suffrage, the role of women in shaping the country's political future still remains minimal.

Global trends exhibit a sharp reduction in the age of political leaders. But can a common Indian woman, just by her commitment and ambition, dream of becoming the Prime Minister of India at the age of 37 – like Jacinda Ardern, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand?



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Across the world, women are appreciated by society in supportive and emotional roles, but very seldom in leadership roles. The world hates and denigrates ambitious women. Take, for example, the case of Hillary Clinton. There is not an iota of doubt that her political experience and acumen trumped Donald Trump's competencies. However, America, the world's so-called top democracy, chose an inexperienced Mr. Trump over her to lead them.

In leadership roles

Historical evidence points out that but for a few Taleb's black swans, all women who have assumed leadership roles did not get there by sheer industry, competence and intelligence. They were allowed only for the convenience of men who were disqualified from assuming these positions, or, if it served some political agenda. In the Indian political arena women leaders were, most often, convenient choices. Their initial acceptance was the perception that they could be conveniently removed, but their inherent acumen belied those designs.

Historical evidence also shows that most women who make it to leadership positions have a mix of privileges – of higher education, the support of influential mentors or families, or belong to upper classes or castes. If there is a survey, I am sure that the figures will show that the percentage of women legislators who have had university and higher education is almost 100 per cent, versus such a percentage of male legislators.

Despite these privileges, women also take longer to assume leadership positions. Even Indira Gandhi, who had the highest elitist advantage and was politically active from an early age, was not fielded as the Prime Minister on Jawaharlal Nehru's death in 1964, and had to wait till Shastri's death in 1966 to assume the prime ministerial role. Rajiv Gandhi, on the other hand, by virtue of being the son, and even though not politically active earlier, was immediately fielded after Mrs Gandhi's assassination. The question thus is, whether an Indian woman shorn of nepotistic advantages can be in a top leadership position in good time.

The deepest cut is that the handful of privileged women who assume leadership are not supportive or empathetic to the aspirations of those women who do not even have access to basic needs such as nutrition, education and financial independence. They reel under the misconception that they have become leaders by virtue of their own efforts and sacrifices, ignoring the personal advantages they possess.

The archives bear testimony to this attitude. During the Round Table Conference held in the 1930s in London, a letter was written on November 16, 1931 by Sarojini Naidu and Begum Jahanara Shah Nawaz presenting a joint manifesto by the All India Women's Conference, the Women's Indian Association, and the Central Committee of the National Council of Women in India. They demanded neither discriminatory nor favourable treatment on the basis of gender in legislative representation, thereby rejecting reservation. Incidentally, Sarojini Naidu had the advantage of being educated at the King's College London and Cambridge with a scholarship from the Nizam of Hyderabad.

Begum Jahanara Shah Nawaz, a Muslim League member, on the other hand advocated, along with Radhabai Subbarayan, a minuscule five per cent reservation for women. While Begum Jahanara Shah Nawaz studied at Queen Mary's College, Lahore, Radhabai Subbarayan had the privilege of attending Somerville College, Oxford. Both the women were from elite backgrounds, affluent families and upper classes.

Regressive views are a hurdle

Thus, the biggest block is the regressive views on gender equality held by men and women. This has been seen even in otherwise progressive men as seen when C. Rajagopalachari opposed Radhabai Subbarayan's choice to fight from a general seat.

Mulayam Singh's accusation in Parliament in 2010, that the previous avatar of the women's reservation Bill would only champion the cause of educated, urban and elite women, failed to recognise that the core objective of the Bill was to create space for women who did not have the good fortune of belonging to privileged and elite classes. A report in the leading daily said that political analysts felt – and rightly so – that the stand of Mulayam Singh and Lalu Prasad Yadav did not stem from their concern for women, but because "it would reduce the space for men who dominate elections in our patriarchal society".

Why do women have to wait so long to close the gender gap? The present Bill is the first step towards actualising gender parity. One only wishes that its implementation would be based on a readjustment of seats on the basis of the 1991 Census, as it is done in the case of Scheduled Caste seats by the Delimitation Commission, rather than waiting for the delimitation exercise pegged on the next Census, whenever it is held.

It is time to quickly set right historical wrongs. Women want change. Society needs change. And there is no reason why it should be late.

The Women's Reservation Act is the first step toward enabling gender parity

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The Maldives, the evolution of a democracy

The Maldives, South Asia's smallest nation-state, sent a clear signal through its latest presidential election: democracy is thriving. The holding of yet another free and fair election enhances the country's international prestige. The key issues at play related to the concerns of voters, especially young voters, for their economic well-being: employment, housing and improvements needed for the tourism industry, education, and health care. Therefore, to portray the election as a football match between China and India resulting in India's defeat – as some western news agencies have done – is to betray ignorance of how this nation of 1,192 islands functions. Luckily, the people of Maldives know better.

Five men, shared future

The old era, when Maumoon Abdul Gayoom ruled as the President from 1978 to 2008, gave way to a multiparty democracy under a new constitution. Mohamed Nasheed, a charismatic but mercurial leader, became the first directly elected President. He did not complete his five-year term and ended up sharing it with Mohamed Waheed Hassan. Abdulla Yameen, the most pro-China president so far, served his full term (2013-18), followed by Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, the candidate of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and the architect of 'India First' policy, who served from 2018 till now. Following his defeat, he will hand over the presidency to the clear winner – Mohamed Muizzu, the opposition candidate backed by an alliance of the Progressive Party of Maldives and the People's National Congress. The mayor of the capital city Male, Mr. Muizzu will be sworn in as the new President next month.

Objectively, the outgoing President had a commendable term in office during a difficult period marked by COVID-19, the Ukraine war, and the global economic slowdown that affected the Maldives too.

Why then, was Mr. Solih defeated?

There are three reasons. First, he was fighting against the currents of history: no incumbent has been re-elected in the Maldives. People feel empowered by the weapons of democracy, to



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To portray the election in the Maldives as a football match between China and India would be a case of ignoring how South Asia's smallest nation-state functions

bring in and oust rulers. Second, what seemed a certainty became inevitable once the ruling MDP party split and Mr. Nasheed exited. Mr. Solih's apparent attachment to the presidential chair clashed with Mr. Nasheed's overwhelming ambition. No reconciliation was forthcoming and, as a result, Mr. Solih lost by the same margin – about 8% of the votes – in the second round that Mr. Nasheed's candidate had scored in the first round.

Third, old-timers believe that with Mr. Nasheed, a communicator par excellence, gone, the MDP could not effectively counter the disinformation campaign launched by the opposition alliance, which inserted, unnecessarily, the issues of geopolitics in a domestic campaign. But in politics, perceptions matter. With Mr. Nasheed's departure, the ruling party lost its 'motherboard'.

The path ahead

The election results have triggered rapid developments. At the request of President-elect Muizzu, President Solih agreed to shift former President Yameen from prison to house arrest. Mr. Yameen is serving a long sentence (11 years) for corruption. He is seen as Mr. Muizzu's mentor. Hence, the first facet of Maldivian politics to watch now is the type of dynamic that develops between the men.

Political compulsions may operate in the beginning, but the logic of power and the magic of a presidency work alike everywhere. It can be expected that the Mayor of Male will soon begin to think and act like a President, conscious of his obligations to all his people and his august regional responsibilities. He may focus on domestic priorities of development while leveraging foreign policy to promote his nation's interests.

In external relations, the new administration will have at least three choices: revert to the 'India Out' campaign of former President Yameen; continue the 'India First' policy of the outgoing President; or innovate a calibrated policy that allows a balancing of relations with its key partners, especially China and India.

The world has changed since Mr. Yameen's

time. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which Maldives had accepted under his leadership, is in serious trouble. Then, the Sri Lankan financial crisis erupted, which required India's steady help. Finally, the Islamist constituency in the Maldives, not particularly friendly to India, will no doubt note the changed equations between India and the Gulf States. It is reflected also in the waning interest of West Asia in a bankrupt Pakistan, which has long nurtured extremism in the Maldives, and can hardly provide succour to those elements in the island-state.

Notes for New Delhi

For India, the next phase of regional diplomacy may admittedly be complex. But enough assets and achievements exist to impart confidence. At the people's level, a positive mindset prevails towards India. This has been reinforced by extensive development work and numerous small community development projects already completed, such as the building of community centres, children's parks, and student ferries between islands. Thousands of Maldivian youth have been to India for training and capacity-building programmes in the past five years. India is a major source of tourism, imports and investment, and zealously nurtures its role as the first responder every time an emergency strikes the Maldives.

But more can be done and should be considered. First, the Colombo Security Conclave (comprising India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius, Bangladesh and the Seychelles) should be strengthened showing tangible outcomes in maritime security and the development of the Blue Economy. By boldly re-imagining the post-South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation South Asia, New Delhi should create a basis for The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) to invite the Maldives as an observer at its next summit. Finally, there is the perennial need for additional resources so that India's strategic community and media organisations take a greater interest in a small but vital neighbour, building bridges of mutual understanding and trust.