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GENDERED PERSPECTIVE TO ELECTIONS: ANALYSIS OF THE GENDER GAP EXISTING IN INDIAN POLITICS

Ms. Monika Gupta

**Ph D Research Scholar , School of International Studies,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.**

ABSTRACT:

Elections in one of the largest democracies of the world have always attracted worldwide attention and at the same time it also provides a larger perspective into the exclusive role of the electorates. One of the exclusive dimensions to look at the elections in India is from a gendered perspective which provides an insight into a more unique and enhanced role of the electorates in a democracy. Women in India are considered to be the carriers of culture and preservers of identity and over the years, they have evolved themselves to an extent that they play a really influential role in almost all the sectors. In terms of electorates, this paper deals with women participation in elections and an analysis of

the gender gap in Indian politics, when it comes to either women's participation in elections directly or their political participation in Indian politics at large.

The paper intends to touch upon different aspects of political participation of women like their right to vote, as ticket holders of different political parties, as handling important portfolios and eminent positions in political system etc. In the light of all this, the paper intends to analyse the existing gender gap in Indian politics, what have been the past trends and what are the present challenges that women need to overcome in order to make their own space in Indian politics. Thus, the paper intends to focus on how women are now emerging as a new political constituency in themselves.

KEYWORDS: *Women, Political Participation, Elections, Gender-Gap.*

INTRODUCTION

With the 2019 elections already in progress, India is gearing up in full swing and the entire country seems to be in the election mode. Also, elections in one of the largest democracies of the world have always attracted worldwide attention and at the same time it has also provided a larger perspective into the exclusive role of the electorates. The changing dynamics of the

electoral process in India is a growing concern as it brings along, both the positive and negative consequences. One of the exclusive dimensions to look at the elections in India is from a gendered perspective which provides an insight into a more unique and enhanced role of the electorates in a democracy. Women in India are considered to be the carriers of culture and preservers of identity and over the years, they have evolved themselves to an extent that they play a really influential role in almost every sector. Women

throughout the history have always been subjugated and considered inferior to men. They have always struggled hard to prove their identity. They were always considered to be best suited to the kitchen and bedroom areas and beyond that, they had no recognition. But slowly and gradually, the time changed and women are now evolving themselves from the shackles of deep-rooted patriarchy and becoming more self-reliant and independent. This paper discusses about women participation in

elections, either through participation in elections directly or through their political participation in Indian politics at large. Women in India are enthusiastically participating in every dimension of politics, from voting to running public offices to being heads of political parties etc. Despite such active involvement, this paper intends to analyse the gender gap existing in Indian politics in the light of the elections in India.

In the above context, the paper shall be divided into four parts. The first part shall discuss about a more general political participation of women in India politics, particularly in the elections. The second part shall discuss about the gender gap existing in Indian politics i.e. the focus on the comparison between the participation of men and women in the elections in India. The third part shall focus more on the past trends and recent challenges with respect to women participation in elections and Indian politics at large. And the fourth and the final part will summarise the findings of the paper and discuss about the apt conclusions.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA:

Before beginning to analyse the level of political participation of women in India, it's important to know the very meaning of the word 'political participation'. The word 'political participation' not only denotes the right to vote but it also encompasses being a member of a political party, sharing the political power, attending the party meetings, having important party positions, being a part of decision-making process and policy making at the governmental level and most importantly contesting elections ('Political Participation', UN). Thus, in a simple language, political participation basically implies a process by which individuals make a significant change in the political scenario of their respective country by recognising the common goals of the society and working in the direction to achieve them.

When it comes to political participation of women in India, it's not that impressive yet. Women constitute about 49 per cent of the population in India and despite this, they do not have significant representation in the decision making system of our country. No doubt that the women's participation has increased over the years but still the percentage remains relatively low. As per the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN Women Report on 'Women in Politics 2017', the Lower House of our Parliament Lok Sabha has 61 women MPs which is equivalent to 11.8 per cent of 542 MPs in Lok Sabha whereas the Upper House Rajya Sabha has 27 women MPs constituting 11 per cent of the total 245 MPs. From 2010 to 2017, women's representation increased to just one percentage point in the Lok Sabha, which is severely alarming. The situation is so bad that India ranks much lower than the African country of Rwanda which has more than 60 per cent women representatives in Parliament in 2017 according to the Economic Survey 2018 (The Economic Times, 2018).

Apart from these basic facts, there are some more interesting facts with respect to the women and their political participation in India. It has been observed that women's participation at the local level governance is substantially better as compared to their urban counterparts. This is evident based on the statistics provided by the Economic Survey which says there are 13.72 lakh elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions which is equivalent to 44.2 per cent of total elected representatives as on December 2017. Also, the women Sarpanchs accounted for 43 per cent of the total Gram Panchayats across India (The Economic Times, 2018). This huge difference in the level of women's political participation at the rural and urban level exists because of many reasons, one prime reason being the reservation being given to the women at local levels, particularly in the elections. However, it has been found via a survey that reasons such as domestic responsibilities, lack of confidence, cultural attitudes prevalent in the society considering women to be inferior and lack of support from the family are some of the factors that have limited women's political participation in India.

After these factual statistics, let's briefly look into the past trends in history in terms of women's political participation in India. The roots of women's participation in politics and that level of consciousness can be traced back to the 19th century when the social reformers of the time realised that all social evils prevalent in the society can only be removed by educating women. This can be

understood by comparing the pre-independence and post-independence phases and how women have evolved themselves into the political spheres.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD:

During the late 19th century and earlier 20th century, there were many women organisations that came up who were working in the direction of issues related to women like right to vote in the elections etc. Some of these organisations were The Women's India Association (WIA) which focussed on areas of religion, education, philanthropy and politics and Annie Besant became the first president of WIA along with Margaret Cousins. The National Council of Women in India (NCWI) was another organisation in a pre-independent India that came up in 1925 as a national branch of the International Council of Women but it wasn't a very successful attempt because of its elitist nature. These were some small initiatives to encourage female participation in the decision making and politics of the country during that time. During this pre-independence phase, rarely women were joining any political parties or taking initiatives to get directly involved into politics although there were many great women leaders who played a significant role in the national struggle for the independence of our country ('Political Participation', 2018).

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD:

Significant level of changes in the political participation of women started happening in the post-independence period when women became more aware about their rights and responsibilities and volunteered to get involved into the mainstream politics of the nation. In the post-independent period, various initiatives in the form of legal, social and economic measures were taken from the government's side to uplift the status of women and involve them into the mainstream politics of the country.

Some of the examples of women political participation in India in the post-independent period include the names of those women who became the part of the political processes in India during that time. In the first constituent assembly, there were just two per cent women as compared to the men. The names of some of the women members were Masuma Begum who later became the Minister of Social Welfare, Renuka Ray who was a veteran social worker, Durgabai who was Gandhian via her philosophy, Radhabai Subbarayan who was appointed as one of the delegates to the first Round Table Conference. Other women members included Rajkumari Amrit Kaur who became the Union Health Minister in 1947; Sucheta Kriplani who became the general secretary of the Congress in 1959, a labour minister of Uttar Pradesh in 1962 and finally became the Chief Minister of United Province from 1963 to 1967. Vijayalakshmi Pandit, another strong women leader in the post-independent phase in India was selected as a delegate to the United Nations and later was appointed as an ambassador to the erstwhile USSR in 1947 and then to the United States. She was also elected as President of the United Nations General Assembly in 1953 (GKToday, 2018).

Till 1980s, women representation in the Lok Sabha was around four to five percent and since then women's political representation in terms of presence in the lower house of the Parliament is on the rise with presently around 11 per cent women in the house. However, the point is, the situation is still not better as India ranks much lower in terms of women representation as compared to some of the other developing countries in the world. The situation is alarming because the global average in terms of female representation in Parliament stands at 22.4 per cent and India stands at 103rd position out of 140 countries. Within Asia itself, India is at 13th position out of 18 countries. To the surprise, even the most orthodox and conservative countries like Saudi Arabia and South Sudan have greater female representation in the Parliament as compared to India. The similar is the situation and even worse in the case of Legislative Assemblies across states in India. The national average of women's representation being 9 per cent and the best performing states include Bihar, Rajasthan and Haryana which have around 14 per cent female representation and the worst in the list are Nagaland and Pondicherry with no women MLAs (Members of Legislative Assemblies) at all (Rao, 2016).

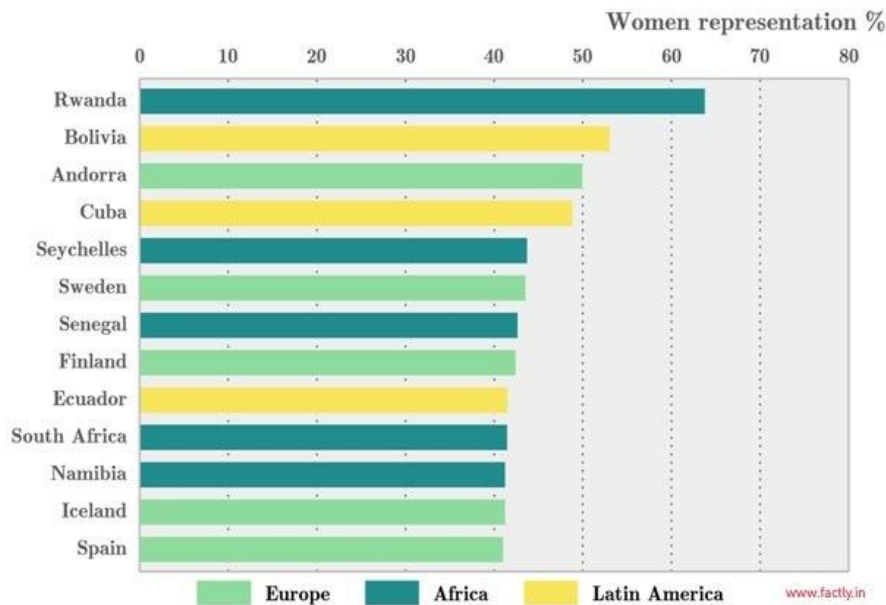
Thus, this brief analysis of the women's representation in Indian politics, both in the pre and post independence phases is indicative of the fact that India still has a huge gender gap existing in

Indian Political System where men outreach women in substantially large numbers even in the 21st century. Also, another important thing to note here is that, the above analysis only provides an insight into one aspect of political participation and that is women’s representation in Parliament. The other aspects like female voter turnout, women as members of political parties, women as holding important portfolios in Indian politics etc. are things that still haven’t been touched upon and that it needs detailed discussion to understand the gender gap existing in Indian politics. Before going into such discussions, it’s important to briefly look at some of the interesting facts about female representation across the world and at what position India stands in giving an equal share in the political sphere to the women.

INDIA’S POSITION IN THE WORLD IN TERMS OF FEMALE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

It has already been discussed that India ranks considerably low on the scale of women representation in the Parliament. However, there are some 13 countries in the world known as the ‘40 percent group’ because they have 40 percent or more female representation in their respective National Parliament. Figure 1 shows the list of all the countries which are part of the ‘40 percent group’.

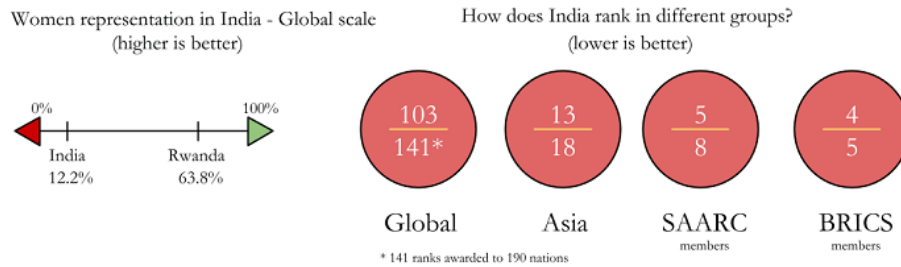
FIGURE 1: List of countries where women constitute 40 percent or more in the National Parliament



Source: www.factly.in

Amidst such overwhelming figures in few countries across the world, it appears really sad to know that one of the largest democracies in the world, India, showcases such poor performance in terms of female representation in the Parliament. Figure 2 shows the performance of India in the world in terms of women having seats in the National Parliament.

FIGURE 2: India's position in the world in terms of female representation in the Parliament



Source: www.factly.in

Figure 2 is just indicative of the fact that in India, the situation in terms of women representation in Parliament is alarming and that the discrepancy and gender-gap existing in the political system needs to be resolved on an urgent basis. Therefore the following section will talk about the gender disparity existing in the Indian Political System and how it is reflected in the various aspects of the political processes.

GENDER-GAP EXISTING IN THE INDIAN POLITICS

This section will particularly talk about the disparity rooted in the Indian political system as far as men and women are concerned. This section will throw light upon how men and women are treated differently when it comes to politics in general and elections in particular. The section will talk about how three main areas where gender gap is clearly visible and huge discrepancies exist between men and women. These three areas are identified as, first in terms of members of the political parties and as party ticket holders, secondly in terms of holding important portfolios in the political system as well as political party and thirdly in terms of the right to vote.

Political Parties' Scepticism in giving tickets to Women: In India, as we know, the candidates standing in the elections come from four different kinds of parties or associations and the four types are National Parties, Regional or State level parties, Registered Unrecognised Parties and lastly as independents. Before analysing the persistent gender gap in Indian politics, let's briefly look at some of the statistics related to seats allotted to women by national parties in general elections in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3: Seats allotted to women by National Parties in General Elections

NATIONAL PARTIES	2004		2009		2014	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
ALL INDIA	355	45	556	59	668	61
CONGRESS	45	12	43	23	57	4
BJP	30	10	44	13	37	28
OTHERS	280	23	469	23	574	29

Source: Election Commission of India (via <http://blogs.reuters.com/india-expertzone/2014/06/13/election-2014-imbalanced-participation-of-women/>)

Thus, figure 3 clearly depicts that numbers are a witness to the fact that women as members of political parties are very less. In other words, political parties are very hesitant to give tickets to women for contesting the elections. It has been observed that there have been more women contesting the elections independently than those contesting from the political parties (Rai, 2014).

In the recent Assembly elections across many states in India like Karnataka, Tripura, Punjab, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, it has been found that political parties are a little hesitant in giving tickets to the women candidates citing various reasons, one of them being that there are not enough women in

the state's politics who could be given tickets. However, practically this is not the case (Sehgal, 2018). The fact is that our Indian political system is still rooted into deep sense of patriarchy who believes that men are far more superior to women and that women are meant to handle household chores only.

Figure 3 has clearly shown the status of women in the general elections. In the Assembly elections too, the situation is the same. Here are some of the statistical figures about the position of women getting tickets to contest the Assembly elections. The highest number of women elected to the assembly from 1957 to 2013, was 18 in 1962 and 13 in 1957 (Kanathanda, 2018). As far as the recent Karnataka assembly elections are concerned, BJP issued tickets to just six women whereas Congress gave 15 tickets to women (Akshatha, 2018). Finally, only seven women won the seats in the 15th Karnataka assembly election which is like 3.1 per cent out of total 222 seats (Aravind, 2018). This was an example of a single state in India but the situation is almost similar or even worse for other states in India too.

After analysing these figures, one wonders about what is the reason behind the hesitance of the political parties in giving party tickets to the women for contesting the elections. It has been a general trend that political parties issue tickets to the richest candidates and if women candidates do not have a strong financial backing, it becomes almost impossible for them to get the tickets. Also, lobbying becomes one of challenges for women candidates as they cannot go on lobbying to an extent that male candidate can do (Akshatha, 2018). Owing to the deep-rooted patriarchal notions, political parties are a little sceptical about women capabilities and find themselves difficult to think out of the narrow zones limited to money and muscle power. They consider men to be far more superior as compared to women and this is the reason that only those women who either have political affiliations or are from the cinema background or are financially strong, tend to get the tickets easily (Kanathanda, 2018).

Women as holders of key portfolios and important positions in Indian Politics:

After looking into the gender gap existing in the Indian politics in terms of women getting tickets to contest the elections and as members of political parties, let's look into another dimension of political participation and i.e. in terms of important positions or portfolios given to the female members if they are elected into the Parliament or Assemblies. It is beyond any doubt that with the passage of time, there has been an increasing political empowerment of Indian women. They have become more independent and confident and more importantly capable enough of contributing to the development of nation. Despite this, having women in official political positions and giving them a place in the decision making is something that women are still struggling into. Men have always been insecure about sharing the status quo with their female counterparts. Beginning the discussion from the rural areas will be more helpful in analysing the gender biasness prevalent in the Indian politics and system.

In the rural areas, where through the constitutional amendment acts of 1993, one-third of the total seats in the local self-government institutions were reserved for women, the condition is highly unsatisfactory. This is so because, it has been observed that in a state like Haryana, despite women are elected and are holding political positions but they are hardly aware about anything related to their village or constituencies and are merely acting as proxy leaders because the real power is still vested in the males of their families who exercise real powers on behalf of these women because the seats are ultimately reserved for women. Thus, one can see the reservation system in place is not doing wonders in case of the rural women as despite holding official positions, they are not allowed to discharge their duties. Obviously, the situation is not the same everywhere as the reservation policy at certain places has worked miraculously well as women in the village council elections are getting elected to the non-reserved posts as well and are handling their responsibilities really well (Sharma, 2016).

In case of women in the urban areas also, the condition is not that great. Despite having great women leaders in our country in politics like Indira Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Pratibha Devi Singh Patil, Mayawati, Mamta Banerjee, Sushma Swaraj, Nirmala Sitharaman etc., women are highly underrepresented in Indian politics. Even after getting elected, they are not given important portfolios and key positions in politics. This is so because of the male-sick mentality that they are more capable in running public offices as compared to the women. No doubt, with the coming of the Modi government in

power in 2014, we have seen glimpses of some really strong women like Sushma Swaraj, the External Affairs Minister and Nirmala Sitharaman, the country's Defence Minister. The present government has even come up with National Mission of Empowerment of Women in 2014 but the results have not been so good so far (Paul and Mehta, 2016).

In terms of Right to Vote:

After analysing the most visible areas of gender biasness in Indian politics, it's time to look at a new dimension of political participation, which perhaps intends to provide a more optimistic angle to the discussion ahead and i.e. the right to vote that is being guaranteed to every citizen of a nation who is above 18 years of age. In this context, it has been observed that women vote share in the elections has increased tremendously. As far as the last 2014 Lok Sabha elections are concerned, women turnout was 65.63 per cent as compared to 67.09 per cent for men. The gap between men and women voters has continuously narrowed with the passage of time. Also, in the 2014 elections, in 16 out of 29 states in India, more women voted than men. An overwhelming figure of 260.6 million women exercised their right to vote in the 2014 elections for the Lok Sabha. Lakshadweep witnessed the highest female voter turnout of 88.4 per cent (WebCite, 2014).

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has played a very important role in elevating the status of women and making them more aware about their rights. ECI has enabled door to door registration of voters and in 2014 issued photo id with polling station information on it making it more convenient for the voters to cast their vote especially the female voters. ECI has also been successful in increasing female voter turnout through mechanisms like education and reaching out to college and universities in India. Another factor responsible for increased female voter turnout is the increased security at the polling stations because of which women are more confident to move out of their houses and cast their vote. Other efforts taken by the ECI in order to ensure maximum female turnout in the elections include development of women specific communication and education tools, involving Anganwadi, ASHA and other female field workers at a huge level, appointing 50 per cent or more female ECI campus ambassadors for colleges or universities, partnering with National Rural Literacy Mission to increase awareness among the rural women and many such similar initiatives. It has been substantially observed that because of these efforts by ECI, female voter turnout particularly for the Assembly elections has increased drastically (Rout, 2014).

Statistical figures are a witness to the fact that female voters have outnumbered their male counterparts in the recent Assembly elections in various states in India. For instance, around 63.26 per cent female voters have cast their vote in the UP Assembly elections in 2017. Similar is the situation in Bihar where females came out in large numbers to cast their vote for the Nitish Kumar government owing to his female centric policies (Vishnoi, 2017). Around 71.42 percent women voted in the Karnataka Assembly Elections in 2018 (Gopal, 2018). Thus, with such figures it can be said that women are now emerging as a new political constituency in themselves (Vishnoi, 2017).

After such an elaborate discussion upon the prevailing gender gap in Indian politics, particularly with respect to the political participation and its three different aspects, one thing that has emerged out of it is that with the passage of time, women have definitely uplifted themselves and have become more aware about their political rights and are becoming more conscious of their duties and responsibilities as citizens of India. The next section of the paper will perhaps talk about briefly summarising the past trends and recent challenges that the women of this country are facing.

Past trends and Recent Challenges faced by Indian Women

Through the elaborate discussion above, it's quite clear that women's political participation overall has increased tremendously and they are more actively engaging themselves into the politics of India. They have been through a lot of hardships and struggles and have managed to come out with flying colours.

The past trends in Indian politics as far as women are concerned have been mostly revolving around the patriarchal notions with typical narrow mindedness approach towards everything. This is

the reason that women in history have always been locked within the cages of kitchen and bedroom. In the political spheres too, men have always thought themselves to be far more superior to women. They were never able to accept this fact that women can also play a very important role in running the political machinery of the country. The question arises, why the political sphere of any country should be gender neutral and why women should be given equal opportunities in this sector? The answer to this question is perhaps because women's political participation in their country has been recognised being symbolical to the status of women in that country i.e. more balanced the gender gap in the political sphere, more elevated will be the status of the women in that country (Kassa, 2015).

As the saying goes, 'let bygones be bygones', similarly in the case of women's political participation, forgetting the past trends and learning out of it, it's more important to discuss what are the challenges surrounding women in the political spheres and what can be done about it. In the political sphere, it has been observed that women are still being perceived as incapable to take on the so called male-oriented areas like finance, energy, defence, trade and infrastructure etc. Women are only restricted to 'women-only' portfolios like as ministers of children welfare, women development, health, education etc. They are even refrained from being a part of various committees and leadership roles because of their gender (iKnowPolitics, 2013).

With such past trends and present challenges, the need of the hour is to reduce the existing gender gap in Indian politics by adopting some long lasting solutions to this problem. The government at all levels should come up with such affirmative policy measures and actions that give women their due place in politics according to the talent they pursue. Women should be more involved in the decision making process and should be made a part of committees, ministerial positions, given leadership roles etc. According to the IPU Plan of Action for Gender Sensitive Parliaments, Parliaments across the world needs to focus on more proportional and equitable representation of women, both at the central and local level (iKnowPolitics, 2013).

Particularly, in the context of India, there has been this debate over the Women's Reservation Bill, which is now a lapsed bill in the Parliament and calls for 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lower House of Parliament i.e. Lok Sabha and in all State Legislative Assemblies. This 108th Constitutional Amendment Bill, if passed, may bring positive and significant changes with respect to lowering down the gender gap in Indian politics. At the same time, the political parties in India have also begun to absorb more women into their parties through their various women wings. Some of these include All India Mahila Congress, All India Federation of Democratic Women, BJP Mahila Morcha, Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sangathan, Telugu Mahila etc. All these women wings of the political parties are trying to incorporate more and more women workers and leaders and are even giving them tickets to contest for the elections. Thus, India is in the need of many such efforts to bridge the gender gap existing in Indian politics in the years to come.

CONCLUSION

Briefly summarising, the paper discusses the existing gender gap in Indian politics and how gendered perspective to political participation presents a whole new dimension for looking at politics. Women in India have always been subjugated and considered inferior to men. But now it's time when women are trying their best to overcome the shackles of deep-rooted patriarchy and the society in return should cooperate in the same.

Today, there are many problems concerning the women in our country ranging from female infanticide to women security to low sex ratio, illiteracy, higher maternity death rates and so on. Without proper female representation in the Parliament or State Legislative Assemblies, it is impossible to address the problems concerning women in a right way. Women in politics itself mean giving a new direction and perspective to the politics in general. When women like Kalpana Chawla can go into space, women definitely have enough potential to take politics to a whole new level. It's the time when women should be allowed to participate in the political processes freely, should be given responsible and important positions in politics and they themselves should realise how important it is for them to cast their vote as they constitute one of the significant vote-bank community. Thus, it's time

for a change, a more optimistic change in Indian politics and women have full potential to bring in that change, provided, that they are given adequate opportunities to do so.

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Ph D Research Scholar , School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.