Chapter VI

Conclusion: Towards a Gendered Understanding of Liberal Democracy in Canada and India

The present thesis is a modest scholarly attempt to study the phenomenon of political representation of women in the liberal democracies of Canada and India. The study explores the processes through which women's political representation concerns create new categories of actions in liberal democratic politics thus initiating changes in policies, frameworks and institutional strategies. It is significant to note in this context that although the idea of representation as meaning popular representation is a modern concept, this conception of representation itself has undergone remarkable changes in the past few decades. However, the key theme that lies at the heart of the varied theoretical approaches to the concept of representation is premised on the notion of the terms of relations between the representatives and the electorate.

In a liberal democracy, the concept of political representation, thus, is challenged with two contrasting responsibilities. One is of representing the interests of the electorate and the other is of exercising authority over them. This dilemma sees the emergence of one of the most significant debates within the political representation discourse, that is, the discourse on 'descriptive' versus 'substantive' representation. While 'descriptive' representation is understood in terms of legislative bodies having a mirror or pictorial representation of the electorate, 'substantive' representation is understood in terms of representation of ideas or acting for others.

In this context, the key challenge that a liberal democracy faces is the tension between its commitment to political equality and pre-existing social and economic inequalities. Moreover, with the growing complexities of social, economic, cultural and political relations in all democracies, it is argued that decisions taken by one set of actors have far reaching influence on a variety of other actors. It is, therefore, observed that in the political framework of a liberal democracy, politics of presence is replacing the

politics of ideas, and who represents whose interests is now a key question. It is further recognized that institutionalized counter measures need to be put in place to counter the existing structural inequities, without which legitimacy of democratic rule comes under threat.

Within this larger discourse on political representation, women participation and representation in political decision making has emerged as a crucial constituency. It is argued that women have been for decades treated as a political minority in the larger political frameworks of liberal democracies. However, with a changing international discourse that saw women as a significant stakeholder in development paradigms and shifting waves of the feminist movement that demanded a blurring of the hitherto existing strong public/private divide, women's interests gradually got adopted into the political representation discourse. The incorporations of the women's concerns in the political representation discourse have initiated a shift in the established normative ideals of liberal democratic political framework creating new parameters of democratic norms and behaviour.

In this larger backdrop, the present study has explored the question of political representation of women in the liberal democracies of Canada and India. The study recognizes that Canada and India are in two different spectrums in terms of the realities of their economic and socio-cultural fabric. However, in terms of the political systems, both the countries have adopted a liberal democratic framework based on the combination of the British and American models of parliamentary supremacy and conventions, written constitution, separation of powers and judicial review. Their shared history of colonialism and the growing diversity of their social milieu challenge their political systems with the issue of accommodating the concerns of the minority and other disadvantageous groups.

It may be observed that the question of political representation of women has emerged as significant in both Canada and India, not only at the national but also in the subnational level. The liberal democratic political frameworks of both the countries

are being challenged with structural inequities faced by women pertaining to access to resources, institutions and political representation. How they seek to redress these inequities, redefining the established norms and behaviours of the state in the process, is of great scholarly significance. The most crucial argument that may be delineated based on the explorations and illustrations of the present study is that in both the countries of Canada and India there is now recognition of gender as a separate and legitimate political category. It is now acknowledged that women have been historically in the periphery of political decision making processes and women's concerns in politics can no longer be marginalized without compromising the acceptance of legitimacy of democratic rule.

This recognition of women as a critical stakeholder in political representation discourse has considerably altered the prevalent structures of knowledge in the Canadian and Indian liberal democracies. Both the countries have been working towards creating new institutional mechanisms in order to facilitate women's presence in political decision making. Although it is acknowledged that a rise in numerical strength of women in legislative bodies does not necessarily imply qualitative changes in women's status, it is perceived as an enabling condition that gives further impetus to the processes of women's larger empowerment and emancipation goals.

It may also be observed that social movements play a critical role in initiating changes in political discourses thereby creating new normative categories of democratic functioning. Understanding the impact of social movements on reshaping the structural and institutional norms of a liberal democracy further allows one to comprehend the processes through which interests get adopted in discourse. In the cases of liberal democracies of Canada and India, it has been viewed that mobilizations by women's groups played a very significant role in creating pressures on the political systems to address women's political concerns. The trajectories of the evolution of the political representation discourse in Canada and India, in fact, reveal that gender, to begin with, was not considered as a separate political category in the larger representation framework. It was the result of a long and continuous struggle

that the need for according women a critical role in political decision-making came to be recognized.

It may also be pointed out here that women's consciousness on issues of political representation witnessed a gradual evolution in both Canada and India. Initially the role of women was perceived as being confined to the private sphere of the home. The private realm of the personal and family life was considered as sacred and outside the purview of the state. In case of Canada, the gradual recruitment of women into the labour force as typists and clerks under the compulsions of the beginnings of industrialization process and shortage of labour created during the First and Second World Wars saw a growing consciousness amongst women they had a role to play beyond the private realm. Since the integration of women into the labour force was on unequal terms and women were not treated at par with their male counterparts, it sowed the seeds of immense discontent. The first phase of women's movement in Canada grew out of this consciousness demanding equal treatment in the workplace. It is from this point that Canada witnessed the growth of a vibrant women's movement that sought to blur the strict division of private and public spheres.

In case of India, the evolution of women's political consciousness was rooted in the nationalist struggle against British rule. Although in the early years women's role in this struggle was seen as an extension of their private roles as mothers and care givers, gradually women came to play a significant role in galvanizing and mobilizing against British colonialism. All women's organizations were born, which pioneered the Indian women's struggle for political equality and universal adult franchise. Although in the first few decades immediately following India's independence, there was a lull in the women's movement, 1970s saw women groups organizing themselves against prevalent ills such as wife beating, price rise, dowry deaths and rape. The consciousness created out of these developments saw gradual recognition of the movement of women's political concerns.

It is further crucial to recognize in this context that women's political representation discourse in both Canada and India have also been shaped considerably by the international norms and standards created by the efforts of the UN and various international instruments and covenants such as the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHCR), *Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations Against Women* (CEDAW), *Beijing Platform for Action* and others. The commitment expressed by the international community to the issue of women's political presence creates a set of moral expectations on domestic political systems to reassess its own norms and ideals. It is this pressure exerted by international instruments combined with domestic struggles that contributed significantly to Canadian and Indian political systems' setting up instruments (Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, 1967/Committee on the Status of Women in India, 1971) to inquire into the status of women in their countries and give recommendations for the redressal of existing grievances.

The domestic women's movements also often take recourse to international resources to further their local struggle. For instance, in the case of Canada, it was the appeal made to the UNHCR that forced the Canadian government to address the issue of the discriminatory practice of the *Indian Act* that denied Indian status to all Native women who married individuals without Indian status. This phenomenon is regarded as transnational advocacy networks, whereby local/regional struggle of a country is fought at a global platform. This role of transnational networks in facilitating domestic struggles is perceived as a crucial development of the twentieth century international political discourse.

Feminist movements today seem to be increasingly becoming part of transnational networks to further the cause of their domestic struggle. Although they "remain rooted in national or local issues, but their vocabulary, strategies and objectives have much in common with each other and have taken on an increasingly *supra-national form*" (Moghadam 2000, 61-2). Thus in the process of aligning local struggles of

202

women with international platforms, feminists movement have remapped relations between local and global. As Sen and Grown argue,

> We now know from our own research that the subordination of women has a long history and is deeply ingrained in economic, political and cultural process. What we have managed to do in the last few years is to forge grassroots women's movements and world-wide networks such as never existed before, to begin to transform that subordination and in the process to break down other oppressive structures as well (1987, 22)

Another key understanding that needs to be highlighted in the context of political representation discourse in Canada and India is the pioneering role played by the RCSW and CSWI in identifying, for the first time, that women's absence from public life is a critical challenge in the path of democratic functioning. Following the recommendations of RCSW and CSWI, a number of committees and commissions were set up in both the countries at the national and subnational levels whose observations not only added new dimensions to the discourse, but led to the setting up new institutional mechanisms for accommodating their recommendations. It, therefore, may be argued in this context that in a liberal democratic political framework, to translate shifts in discourses into the establishment of new norms and behaviours, articulation of interests also has to be carried out through formal channels governance. It, therefore, needs to be noted and asserted here that without the expression of the women's question through such formal channels, the trajectories of political representation discourse in both the countries might have evolved quite differently.

One further needs to recognize in this background that the discourse on political representation of women offers a unique site of activism. The movement for political representation for women, unlike other social movements, is more concerned with legislative procedures. Hence it is imperative for such a movement to adopt a distinct method of activism. This method of activism goes much beyond the common judicial litigation measure. The judiciary does not have too significant a role to play in the women's struggle for political representation. The site for the struggle on political

representation of women is the legislative arena, in which women seek to make their presence felt. Thus nature of activism in the battle for political representation for women differs crucially from other social movements that appeal to the judiciary.

Further, the examination of dynamics of political representation of women at the federal parliamentary level in both Canada and India in the present study brings forth few interesting insights. It is observed that women are largely absent from national legislative bodies in both the countries. In case of Canada, obligations of family responsibility, lack of financial and public support and prejudiced media coverage emerge as some of the crucial impediments in the achievement of political goals of women. In the Indian case, it has been observed that despite an increasing reduction in the gap between male and female participation in the polls, election of women candidates have been very poor. Moreover, it is also perceived in case of both the liberal democracies that political parties have a crucial role to play in facilitating women's political representation. Without political party support women candidates have very little possibility of translating their candidature to seats in the legislative bodies.

What is further significant to note is that while in case of Canada it is observed that there is not much discrimination in the electorate in terms of election of male or female candidates, in India there is a significant gap between number of women candidates nominated and the number of women candidates finally getting elected to the Lower House of the Parliament. Therefore, it is important that the solutions sought to women's political representation are rooted in this contextual reality. Although it is now recognized that new structural and institutional mechanisms are to be put in place within the larger liberal democratic political framework to address the issue of political representation of women, it is important to ascertain that these mechanisms are not homogenized.

At this backdrop, an exploration of the key issues and debates in the political representation discourse in Canada and India reveal that they are rooted in identifying new institutional mechanisms that would best address the women's concerns. While

in case of Canada, electoral reforms as a key to enhance women's political representation emerge as a key strand of the debate, in India, the debate centers around the issue of reservation of seats for women in legislative bodies. Arguing that reforming the Canadian electoral system from 'first-past-the-post' to that of proportional representation would work better for giving political voice to disadvantaged groups, many provinces in Canada have already gone in for electoral reforms. However, at the same time, various other alternatives such as increasing funding to women candidates, political party quotas and compensation-seats options are also being proposed and debated.

In case of India, it may be observed that the reservation discourse has emerged as a part of the larger process of democratic decentralization. Although the Upper House of the Indian Parliament passed the *Women's Reservation Bill* that reserves 33 percent seats for women in the Lower House of the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies, the Bill is yet to have successful passage in the Lower House. The most vehement criticism of the policy of reservation is carried out on two accounts: one, the rotation clause that provides for reserving a seat for women only once in a block of three general elections; and two, the absence of any reservation provision for OBC and minority women.

The major political parties in India also are divided on the issue of reservation, although in principle accepting the need for reserving seats to facilitate women's political representation, mainly on grounds of making provision of reserving seats for backward castes and minority women. Various alternatives to the present *Reservation Bill*, such as political party quota, dual member constituencies, and quota within quota for backward castes and minorities within the current Bill are also being proposed. In fact, in India too, like Canada, there is a growing feeling that perhaps there is a need to look at alternative models such as electoral reforms to advance the cause of representation of marginal groups. As Taagepera and Shugart argue, the outcome of elections does not depend on the popular votes alone, but is also dictated by the rules or methods that are used for the election process (1989, 2-3). Therefore, it is argued

that re-charting of the electoral processes may also be explored as one of the vital alternatives in the political representation of women.

It may be argued here although both Canada and India are debating various alternatives to address the challenge of political representation of women, the very fact that established liberal democratic norms and ideals stemming from the principle political equality is being reassessed and new categories of actions are being considered bears evidence to recognition of women as a critical political category. It further needs to be asserted that governance today is understood in much broader terms than the way it was conceptualized earlier with gender concerns coming in. In this context, the present study attempts to locate the women's representation question within the larger discourse on Aboriginal self-governance in Canada.

The self-governance discourse in Canada is argued to be one of the most challenging engagements of the liberal democratic political framework that aims at reworking the federal Canadian relationship with the Aboriginal people. Therefore, it is significant to locate the women's concerns in the self-governance discourse and to examine how the emergence of this question remaps the hitherto existing norms of the democratic engagement. An important understanding that has to be highlighted in this context is that the experiences of women cannot be homogenized, and political concerns of women in federal level in Canada and that in the Aboriginal self-governance level differ crucially owing to their lived realities.

An exploration of emerging women's political concerns in the Aboriginal self-governance discourse reveals that from predominantly masculine terms of self-government negotiations, there is now a shift in parameters of democratic engagement to recognition of the role that women ought to play in this regard. There is also an attempt to deconstruct the colonial formulations of Aboriginal women's role as being traditionally passive and subservient, revive traditional Aboriginal understandings of women's role and status that negates the existence of gender hierarchies and draws from the strength of the female force. Even within Aboriginal societies, there is a

struggle launched against the internalization of the devaluation of Aboriginal women, and women are demanding equal rights and opportunities to participate in the Aboriginal self-governance negotiations and processes.

Thus emergence of women's demand of an equal right of participation and representation in Aboriginal self-governance negotiations and processes has initiated shifts in the very parameters of this discourse. It is further observed that from an aggressive policy of suppression of Aboriginal identity and its assimilation to the so-called mainstream Canadian fabric, the federal government in Canada today is working towards a policy of recognition of Aboriginal distinctness. And within this framework, women's interests and political concerns are now compelling the Canadian democracy to reassess its policy decisions. Efforts are also on to increase the federal funding for capacity building of various Aboriginal women's groups, and to establish substantive and procedural equality in acts and decisions taken by the federal government in order to facilitate Aboriginal women's right to participate and to be represented in self-governance processes.

Within the larger discourse on political representation of women, while talking about initiating of new institutional policy norms by liberal democracies particularly in the form of quotas (as has been adopted by many liberal democracies), one critical question that arises is whether 'top-down' institutional changes are viable mechanisms for mitigating existing structural inequities. It also needs to be investigated whether a 'quantitative' rise in women's presence in legislative bodies get translated into 'qualitative' changes in the status of women.

In order to examine this question, the present study has explored the implications of reservation of 33 percent seats for women in India's village self-governing instructions (Panchayati Raj). In this context, instances are specifically drawn from cases of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) women's representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This is because given the deep existing cleavages in the Indian society on grounds of class, caste, ethnicity, religion, region and others,

it is significant to study the implications that a policy of reservation has on the marginalized sections within the larger 'category' of women.

It is observed that two contrasting trends emerge in this regard: one, that women have been mere rubber stamps or proxies in PRIs without any real decision making powers; and the other is that women have gradually emerged to play an important role in village self-governing, most particularly with the aid of social and structural support. Although it is true that women, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe face number of challenges in their functioning as elected representatives in the PRIs in terms of dominance by upper caste, masculine processes of decision making and dissemination, violence, societal restrictions and others, policy of reservation still emerges as an enabling condition setting the processes of larger empowerment of women in motion. It leads to the blurring of the existing public/private divide and contributes to changing not only societal perceptions on women's prescribed role but also a change in the attitude of women's themselves.

However, it is to be asserted here that 'top-down' institutional measures like quotas cannot in itself become a source of women's larger empowerment and emancipation and has to be supported by adequate support mechanisms. It has been observed that instances where women representatives in PRIs had larger access to information, education, funding and such other support structures, they were better equipped to deliver positive results. It, nonetheless, needs to be acknowledged and recognized that in liberal democratic political framework, to achieve equality in representation in the presence of vast structural inequities, new institutional mechanisms need to be set up. In the absence of a gendered understanding of political representation, legitimacy of democratic functioning comes under challenge.

One needs to highlight here that in several developing and transitional systems, the political positioning of women highlights three important patterns. First, quotas can be a useful mechanism to overcome problems of development and their interrelationship with weak institutions. Second, transnational advocacy, provides a

forum by which, structural inequities can be overcome, by building up suitable structures of support. These structures imply that individuals and organizations agitating for social change can be sustained, both financially and ideationally, as political change requires long-term and sustained efforts. Third, the problem of representation (especially at the sub-national level) is closely connected with that of the access to resources, both within and outside the household. In many instances, access to decision making power, does not necessarily imply that women office holders are able to make critical contributions to substantive issues of public policy or have a critical say in community based developmental programmes. At the same time giving women access and control over developmental programmes has meant a marked difference in the manner in which policies can be implemented.

In the framework of the present study, one needs to further explain that the issue of political representation of women and debates on the nature of this representation are now at the forefront of how we come to understand democracy. Understandings of democratization are now going beyond the notions of establishing institutions with fixed rules of electoral procedure and now include gendered understandings, which highlight the interconnectedness between equitable electoral processes, gender equality and holistic development. For instance, in the context of international political development, several important cases that highlight these patterns have emerged.

Two of the most important cases are occurring in newly democratizing countries that are emerging from decades of conflict, and that are still transitioning to complete normalcy. In the first case, Afghanistan's Parliament is constitutionally mandated to reserve 68 out of 249 seats for women. However, it is argued that the high rate of female illiteracy means that members of parliament would lack the ability to defend women's rights and engage in meaningful debate (IRIN 2005). In the case of Iraq, the laws governing the provincial elections sought to reserve 30 percent of candidatures for women, which led to 4000 women running for elections out of 14,000 in 14 provinces. Yet, severe disparities exist within the quality of electoral competition,

with women in the provinces, facing a great degree of resistance from traditional tribal structures, as opposed to those contesting from the more urban sections of the country, especially the city of Baghdad. Women candidates have been seen not to campaign and remaining indoors, while several women have received death threats from armed groups, who are completely opposed to the political process.

Even when women do become successful in securing seats, they are excluded from decision-making meetings of the parties. As stated by a candidate, "We are seeing women in soft ministries," moreover, even "those women who are chosen by certain political parties can't give their positions independently, they have to bow to a leader. We want to have a woman who is a leader herself" (New York Times 2008). In another set of interesting developments, it is being found that in Rwanda, which is still recovering from the effects of the genocide, whereby 800,000 people died in 100 days (Africa Recovery 2004), the number of women in Parliament has reached 44 out of 80 elected members, making Rwanda the first country where women hold a majority (New York Times 2008).

Keeping these developments in mind, in conclusion it must be pointed out that the present study draws attention to the beginning of a long-term engagement with crucial questions that lie at the heart of the discourse of democracy. The study underlines that conventionally understood forms of democracy are undergoing an extensive redefinition. Critical to this redefinition is the notion that electoral and political reforms have to closely consider the issue of gender inequity, and that true progress in the consolidation of democracy would imply the creation of mechanisms that would seek to facilitate the removal of these inequities. The present study also seeks to lay the grounds for further investigations on critical questions of representation, and their interconnectedness with larger paradigms of development.

Moreover, it is observed in the course of the study that research on women's political representation has to consider the distinct nature of institutions and processes at both the national and sub-national levels. Especially important, are the disparities prevalent

in the nature of political questions that are considered and the nature of access that is available to women at these levels. As was especially seen in the case of both Canada and India, debates surrounding representation in the national legislatures were essentially distinct from political developments occurring at the sub-national level. Indeed, at the sub-national level, the challenges of accommodating the 'marginalized within the marginalized' represent the next stage of democratization, political development and social transformation. It is in understanding the larger context of this next stage in democratization that the study seeks to make its contribution.