

SADF Podcast S4E5 Edited Transcript

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The Silent Voter vs. the Political Agent: How India's Women Are Changing Democracy

Host: South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF)

Guest: Dr Chayanika Uniyal, University of Delhi

This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity, grammar and readability while preserving the substance, arguments and character of the original conversation. Views expressed by the speakers are their own.

Host

Welcome to the SADF Podcast, where we explore critical issues shaping South Asia's political and social landscape.

Today, we turn to a fascinating transformation in Indian democracy.

Women voters are no longer simply a silent presence at the ballot box. They are increasingly becoming decisive political actors.

In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, women's turnout once again came close to—or in some assessments slightly exceeded—men's turnout. Yet women continue to make up only around 14 per cent of Parliament.

At the same time, welfare programmes, grassroots mobilisation and Election Commission initiatives have helped narrow the gender gap in electoral participation, while the 106th Constitutional Amendment provides for one-third reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies, although implementation remains dependent on future delimitation and census processes.

So what does this transformation mean for Indian democracy?

Are women voters genuinely exercising independent political agency, or do family, community and party structures continue to constrain their choices?

And how do caste, class and region intersect with gender in shaping political behaviour?

To unpack these questions, I am joined by **Dr Chayanika Uniyal of the University of Delhi**, whose research traces the evolution of women's political participation from colonial suffrage debates to contemporary questions of representation.

Her work offers an important perspective on why formal political rights do not always translate into substantive political power.

Dr Uniyal, welcome to the podcast. It is a pleasure to have you with us.

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

Thank you. Thank you very much.

Host

Our subject today is the movement from the “**silent voter**” to the “**political agent**.”

How would you define the silent woman voter in India, and what distinguishes her from a political agent?

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

In India, I would describe a silent voter as a woman who participates in elections but does not necessarily exercise independent influence over wider political decisions.

Her voting choice may still be shaped by her family, community, caste or other social structures.

Political parties may also view women primarily as an electoral category—a number—rather than as individual political actors with distinct views and interests.

But things are changing.

More women are developing their own preferences regarding candidates and political parties, and women are increasingly playing meaningful roles in local governance.

So there is certainly change.

But I would not yet call it a large-scale transformation.

We still have a very long way to go.

Host

Why, then, do you still describe women as “silent voters”?

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

Because the problem is deeply rooted in social attitudes.

Women are often still treated as people who require guidance—from parents, husbands, brothers or sons—rather than as autonomous individuals.

Let me give you an example from my own experience at Delhi University.

There are political affiliations within university life as well, including elections involving teachers’ associations and groups aligned with different political traditions.

A senior person once told me that a particular male teacher could not really be considered a Congress supporter because his wife supported the Aam Aadmi Party.

I asked why his wife could not simply hold a different political opinion.

The response was essentially: if he could not convince his own wife, how could he be regarded as a serious Congress leader?

Think about what that means.

This is Delhi University, one of the country's leading educational institutions.

If that kind of thinking exists there, we can imagine how deeply embedded such attitudes may be elsewhere.

That is why I still use the term "silent voter".

Women are voting, but they are not always recognised as independent political actors.

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

I see something similar among my students.

I teach gender in global history, and our classroom discussions often go well beyond the syllabus.

Young women are very articulate in class.

They have strong opinions.

But many tell me that they are not comfortable expressing the same views publicly or within their families.

They fear that their opinions could affect their own reputation or that of their family.

So there is a clear gap.

Women may feel politically confident in a protected environment such as a classroom, but not necessarily in wider society.

That gap has to be closed.

Women should be able to express political opinions without fearing that they will be judged socially for doing so.

Host

Before we move to your historical research, I want to ask about policymaking.

Can you identify examples where women's political participation or organised women's voices have actually changed policy?

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

It is difficult for me to say that women voters alone have changed a particular policy.

But I can give you one example of organised women's political action.

I have not only worked as an academic; I have also had political involvement with the Congress Party.

I was associated at different points with the National Students' Union of India, the Youth Congress and the Mahila Congress.

When the Goods and Services Tax was introduced, sanitary pads were initially taxed.

That became an important political issue because sanitary products are not luxury goods. They are a basic need.

Many women in rural areas were already unable to afford sanitary pads, so imposing GST risked making access even more difficult.

At that time, **Sushmita Dev**, who was then President of the Mahila Congress and a Member of Parliament, strongly opposed the tax.

The Mahila Congress campaigned against it, civil-society organisations also became involved, and ultimately the government removed GST from sanitary napkins.

That is an example of policy change in which women's political voices mattered.

It also shows why women need to be present in decision-making institutions.

There are certain experiences and policy consequences that women may recognise more immediately because they live them directly.

Host

Looking back at your research on women's suffrage during the colonial period, do you see echoes of those historical patterns in contemporary political behaviour?

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

Absolutely.

If we look at the history of the Indian National Congress during the freedom movement, there are some very interesting developments.

The Congress was founded on 28 December 1885, and membership was formally open to women from the beginning.

Women were not present in significant numbers at the first session, but within a few years they began participating.

At the Bombay session in 1889, ten women attended, including women associated with the reformer Pandita Ramabai.

Initially, they did not have the same opportunity to speak or vote on resolutions.

But by the early 1890s, women had begun speaking at Congress sessions.

So the freedom movement included women relatively early, even if their numbers were initially small.

When Gandhi entered the national movement, women's participation expanded dramatically.

During movements such as Non-Cooperation, very large numbers of women became politically active.

One important milestone came in 1925, when **Sarojini Naidu became the first Indian woman to serve as President of the Indian National Congress.**

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

Why does that matter?

Because this was still a colonial period in which European powers justified imperial rule partly by claiming that they represented a more advanced or progressive civilisation.

Yet an Indian political movement had elevated a woman to its highest office at a time when women still faced considerable barriers in many Western political parties and institutions.

That suggests India had a significant foundation for women's political participation.

And I do not think that progress happened simply because enlightened male leaders gave women space.

Women themselves continuously demanded equality.

At the same time, male leaders such as Gandhi, Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose were often willing to support greater participation by women.

So both factors mattered.

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

But after independence, I see a significant gap.

Under the Government of India Act 1935, there were provisions that created reserved political representation for women.

In the 1937 elections, this helped bring more women into legislative institutions.

But when the Constitution came into force in 1950, there was no comparable reservation for women in Parliament or state legislatures.

The Constituent Assembly debates show several different positions among women themselves.

Some women opposed reservations because they believed that once women received equal constitutional rights, they would naturally enter democratic institutions on equal terms.

That assumption proved overly optimistic.

Other women worried that reserved seats could actually disadvantage politically active women.

For example, if one constituency were reserved for a woman, political parties might say: “We have already given a ticket to a woman there, so another constituency should go to a male candidate.”

They feared that reservation could become a ceiling rather than a floor.

Others proposed more indirect mechanisms, such as ensuring that seats vacated by women continued to be filled by women.

So there were different approaches, but there was no strong consensus demanding a broad constitutional reservation.

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

Nehru himself recognised that women were not receiving the political representation they deserved.

He wrote to chief ministers encouraging them to identify women who could enter Parliament, and he acknowledged in the Constituent Assembly that women had not received adequate representation.

But he did not pursue a strong legal mechanism to correct that imbalance.

Why?

I think there may have been two assumptions.

The first was that constitutional equality would gradually lead to political equality.

The second concerns the political struggle over the **Hindu Code Bills**.

Dr B. R. Ambedkar strongly supported extensive legal reforms concerning women’s rights in areas such as marriage, inheritance and property.

He wanted the reforms enacted comprehensively.

Yet even Nehru, despite being a powerful political leader, faced enormous social and political resistance.

The reforms ultimately had to be broken into different pieces and passed gradually.

Ambedkar resigned from the Cabinet partly in frustration over the failure to enact the original Hindu Code Bill as he intended.

That episode showed just how resistant society remained to women’s social and economic equality.

Perhaps political leaders concluded that if society was not yet prepared to accept women’s equality in family and property law, achieving equal political representation would be even more difficult.

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

Then there was another long gap until the period of **Rajiv Gandhi**, when the issue of one-third reservation for women gained renewed political attention.

Initially, the ambition extended to Parliament and state legislatures.

But because there was strong resistance, reform began at the local level.

That ultimately produced the major changes of the early 1990s.

Since the introduction of reservations in local governance, approximately 1.5 million women have held positions in local bodies across India.

But at the national level, the picture remains much weaker.

Women made up around 14.4 per cent of the Lok Sabha elected in 2019.

In 2024, the proportion declined to around 13.6 per cent.

So India had a strong historical foundation for women's political participation, but we have not built an equally strong institutional structure on top of it.

Host

Since we are speaking about history, it is also worth remembering how many women shaped India's struggle against colonial rule.

The independence movement was powered not only by iconic male leaders but by extraordinary women.

Long before 1857, **Velu Nachiyar**, the queen of Sivaganga, resisted the East India Company.

During the revolt of 1857, **Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi** became one of the great symbols of armed resistance, while **Begum Hazrat Mahal** played a leading role in the rebellion in Awadh.

In the twentieth century, figures such as **Sarojini Naidu** and **Aruna Asaf Ali**, who famously raised the national flag during the Quit India Movement, became symbols of civil resistance.

Bengal also produced extraordinary revolutionary women.

Pritilata Waddedar led an attack on the Pahartali European Club in Chittagong and died rather than allow herself to be captured.

Matangini Hazra, remembered affectionately as *Gandhi Buri*, was killed while leading a Quit India procession with the national flag in her hands.

Women were fighters, strategists, organisers and reformers throughout the independence movement.

That brings us back to the present.

Women's electoral turnout surpassed or matched men's turnout in recent national elections.

What does that actually tell us?

Greater political autonomy? Better mobilisation? Or something else?

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

Women are certainly more educated and more electorally active than before.

But higher turnout does not automatically mean that women have become fully independent political actors.

Many social forces still influence women's electoral choices.

And the representation figures show the difference very clearly.

Women vote in very large numbers, yet they remain seriously underrepresented in political office.

In the current Union government, for example, only a small number of Cabinet positions are held by women.

At the state level, the disparity can be even greater.

Nagaland elected women to its Legislative Assembly for the first time only in 2023, despite becoming a state in 1963.

Mizoram has also historically elected very few women.

Even when women become ministers, they are disproportionately assigned portfolios associated with women, children or social welfare.

Women are much less frequently entrusted with powerful portfolios such as finance, home affairs or other core ministries.

India has had only two women Presidents.

The total number of women who have served as chief ministers is also very small when compared with the hundreds of male chief ministers who have governed India's states and territories since independence.

So high female turnout is important.

But it does **not** automatically translate into equal participation in decision-making institutions.

That is the central gap.

Host

Your research also highlights the significance of the **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments**.

Could you explain what those amendments did and how they created a pipeline for women's political agency at higher levels?

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, enacted in the early 1990s, transformed local governance in India.

The **73rd Amendment** strengthened Panchayati Raj institutions in rural areas, while the **74th Amendment** addressed urban local bodies such as municipalities and municipal corporations.

A crucial element was the reservation of at least one-third of seats for women.

This was genuinely transformative.

Before these reforms, women had very limited representation in local elected bodies.

The reservation created an institutional mechanism that required political parties and local systems to give women opportunities to contest.

In many states today, the quota has subsequently been increased to **50 per cent**.

That has brought very large numbers of women into local politics.

Host

Why is that particularly important from a gender perspective?

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

Because formal equality alone was not producing equal outcomes.

Women already possessed constitutional rights.

There were also laws intended to empower women.

But representation remained extremely unequal.

When legal equality does not produce substantive equality, some form of affirmative intervention may be necessary.

The reservation in local bodies was precisely such an intervention.

Without it, political parties could simply continue saying that women were not “strong candidates”.

Reservation forced the system to create opportunities.

That matters because even today political parties do not distribute tickets equally between men and women in parliamentary or assembly elections.

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

In my own work, I have thought about women entering politics through roughly four different pathways.

The first is **political family background**.

A woman may enter politics because her father, husband, brother or another relative is already politically established.

That gives her an initial advantage.

But many such women subsequently establish political identities of their own.

Indira Gandhi is an obvious example.

Her father was Jawaharlal Nehru, which undoubtedly gave her enormous political access.

But she is remembered today for her own political career rather than simply as Nehru's daughter.

The same can be said of other figures such as Sheila Dikshit or Sonia Gandhi.

They may have entered politics through established networks, but they later demonstrated independent political capacity.

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

The second category includes women who do not necessarily come from political families but benefit from the support of a powerful male political mentor.

Mayawati's early relationship with **Kanshi Ram** is one example.

J. Jayalalithaa also emerged in a political environment shaped by a powerful male mentor.

The third category consists of women who rise through **party organisation itself**, building their political careers step by step.

Figures such as **Sushma Swaraj**, **Ambika Soni** and **Uma Bharti** can be understood in this way.

The fourth category is particularly interesting: women who build an independent political structure despite lacking a powerful family background or lasting organisational patronage.

For me, **Mamata Banerjee** is an exceptional example.

She began within the Congress but eventually broke away and created her own political organisation.

She did not inherit a political dynasty, and she ultimately built her own power base.

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

There are also remarkable historical examples of women maintaining independent political identities even within marriage.

One that deserves greater attention is **Sucheta Kripalani**.

She and her husband, J. B. Kripalani, were both involved in the Congress during the freedom struggle.

After independence, her husband developed serious ideological disagreements with Nehru, left the Congress and created his own political organisation.

Sucheta Kripalani made a different choice.

She remained in the Congress.

They continued to live as husband and wife while maintaining different political affiliations.

That was extraordinarily progressive for its time.

She later became the first woman Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh—and indeed the first woman chief minister of any Indian state.

That is a powerful example of female political autonomy.

Host

We have reached the final part of the conversation, so let me give you a rapid-fire question.

Beyond reservation, what reforms would most effectively increase women's political representation?

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

First, we need an **enabling political environment**.

Gandhi's mobilisation strategies created forms of political action in which many women felt they could participate.

We need similarly inclusive environments today.

Second, women need **equal opportunity without prejudice**.

Let me give you an example from student politics.

During a Delhi University Students' Union election, two strong women were being considered for important positions: Ragini Nayak and Amrita Dhawan.

I argued that one should be nominated for president and the other for vice-president because both were strong candidates.

Someone responded that having two women on the same panel might weaken it.

My response was simple: if we nominate four men, is there any guarantee that all four will win?

Eventually, two women were included on the panel, and the whole panel won.

The problem was therefore not women's electoral capacity.

It was the assumption that women were inherently weaker candidates.

I do not think we have seen that kind of representation repeated often enough.

So the basic principle is straightforward:

Give women the opportunity first, and then judge them on performance.

Host

You also mentioned the need for new metrics.

If turnout alone does not adequately measure women's political agency, what else should we track?

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

The first metric should be **ticket allocation**.

How many women are political parties actually nominating in winnable seats?

That tells us much more than rhetoric about empowerment.

The second should be **positions inside political organisations**.

How many women lead parties, youth organisations, student wings or important internal committees?

For example, organisations may claim to promote women while rarely appointing women to their most powerful leadership positions.

So institutional leadership matters.

The third metric should be **policy influence**.

Do women legislators introduce bills?

Do they ask parliamentary questions?

Do they lead debates?

Do they shape budgets?

And importantly, are they influential only on subjects classified as "women's issues" or welfare, or are they exercising authority across the full range of public policy?

We should also examine **autonomy in decision-making**.

A woman occupying a political office does not automatically mean that she possesses real political power.

Those are the kinds of indicators that would allow us to measure political agency much more seriously.

Host

That brings us to the end of today's conversation.

We have explored the long evolution from the **silent voter to the political agent**: the rise in women's electoral participation, the historical foundations of women's political mobilisation in India, the transformative role of reservations in local government, and the structural barriers that continue to restrict women's representation at higher levels.

As Dr Uniyal has reminded us, turnout is only one part of the democratic picture.

True political agency is not simply the right to cast a ballot. It is the power to choose independently, to contest elections, to lead institutions, to shape policy and to exercise authority.

Closing India's gender gap in turnout is an important democratic achievement.

The next challenge is closing the much larger gap between **voting and governing**.

Dr Uniyal, thank you very much for sharing your expertise with us.

And to our listeners, thank you for joining the SADF Podcast.

Until next time, stay informed and stay engaged.

Dr Chayanika Uniyal

Thank you.