

# comment

The Hindustan Times  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

## They have made their mark

In the 2017 polls, there were more women voters than men. Now give them their due

**N**o matter which party comes out triumphant in this round of assembly elections, there is some good news for those who have the appetite to look beyond the numbers: Data being compiled by the Election Commission show that more women than men came out to vote in the states that went to the polls. In the country's most populous states, Uttar Pradesh, which is also arguably one of the most patriarchal, 63.26% of woman voters cast their votes in the seven-phase assembly election that concluded on Wednesday. While last time around women outnumbered men, in 2007, when the state elected Mayawati, men had outnumbered women in the polling percentage at 49.35 to 41.92. This year, more women turned out to vote in Manipur (the final data is not out but initial numbers show that there has been a spike of about 6% in women casting their vote); Goa (83.67 versus 78.12%), Punjab (78.15 versus 76.73%) and Uttarakhand (69.34 versus 62.28).

This spurt in women's participation in the political process is positive news and can be attributed to rising education levels as also the poll panel's hard work to impress upon the people that voting is a right that they must exercise without fail. One cannot also deny that political parties did their bit, at least in UP, to ensure that women come out and vote. While the BJP promised controversial anti-Romeo squads in UP to save girls from the bane of eve teasing, the ruling Samajwadi Party offered free cycles for school-going girls, set up a dedicated helpline and introduced rebate in state public transport for women. The BSP also promised better safety for women through an improved law and order system. In Punjab too safety of women was a key election issue. This increase in political participation has been possible due to some attendant developments that have been happening for a few years now: Increased access to information and communication, fall in birth and fertility rates and increase in female life expectancy.

With large number of women showing their faith in the democratic process, the onus will be on the political parties to respond positively to demands for better political representation, improved safety, livelihood and health. It will also hopefully push them to apply a gender perspective to policymaking. This is of critical importance because public policy has the capacity to either perpetuate or eliminate discrimination and gender inequality.

### incidentally

GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI



## A man ahead of his time

A hundred years ago, Edwin S Montagu, a Jewish MP from England, proposed giving Indian women equal voting rights to men

**E**dwin Samuel Montagu is not a name that will resonate with Indians today. Born in 1879 and dying in 1924, he belongs to a bygone era — the Jewish MP who opposed the Balfour Declaration. Edwin Samuel Montagu means little if anything to contemporary India. And yet, a hundred years ago, in 1917, the 38-year-old Montagu was perhaps the most discussed Englishman for our country.

Montagu had been appointed secretary of state for India that year. The position made him virtually in charge of "the brightest gem on the British Crown". A liberal in every sense of the term, Montagu was a radical if not quite a "free-thinking" politician who could not be stereotypical. Responding to the growing demand for Swaraj, Montagu proposed to his Cabinet "the gradual development of free institutions in India with a view to ultimate self-government".

In 1917 this was a huge leap forward, which consternated conservative opinion in London. Curzon, then the Lord Privy Seal, opposed this as being too liberal, too radical, and suggested an alternative formulation that suggested the government would work towards "increasing association of Indians in every branch of the administration and the gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realisation of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire." Montagu's formulation was dropped and Curzon's accepted, leading to the Government of India Act of 1919.

A bicameral central legislature came into being, presaging our Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, provincial legislatures with partially "responsible" governments comprising some Indian ministers as well; and a Public Services Commission. These were foundational developments. They cannot all be ascribed to Montagu who shared his credit with Chelmsford. But to the extent that any major edifice has a principal archi-

tect, Montagu was the principal architect of the Montford Reforms of 1917 and of the Government of India Act of 1919.

As India gets to know the outcome of the elections held to the assemblies of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab and Goa, it can reflect on the fact that the seeds of "self-government", propagated by Indian hands, were sown on the constitutional seed-bed by a young English liberal.

Prior to making his recommendations in the report, Montagu toured India, triggering a new zeal for political reform, for franchise and for representation. Theosophists Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins catalysed a demand for women's voting rights equal to those of men. This was not granted instantly, but the process had begun.

A joint parliamentary committee, while not conceding female suffrage, enabled it by leaving it to provincial legislatures to consider it. Some of these legislatures which had come up, thanks in great measure to Montagu gave women voting and contesting rights. The highly perspicacious princely state of Travancore-Cochin showed the way which Madras and Bombay took eagerly.

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, in her autobiography, wrote about how difficult it was for a woman even to get a Congress ticket in the elections held in 1926 under the Montford Act of 1919. She was defeated but the fact that she stood was in itself historic and inspirational. The pioneering reformer Muthulakshmi Reddi stood and won in 1927, becoming India's first woman legislator in 1927. No Muthulakshmi, no Devadasi abolition; no Montford, no Muthulakshmi.

Today, when women voting and contesting elections is taken for granted, one cannot afford to forget the contribution made towards that fundamental force in India's democracy by a very young, a very radical and a very little-remembered Edwin Montagu.

Montagu's independent spirit showed itself in another



Today, women voting and contesting elections in India is taken for granted. Two women after casting their vote at a polling station, Lucknow, February 19  
DEEPAK GUPTA/HT

theatre as well. On August 23, 1917, the House of Commons discussed Palestine in what has become famous as the Balfour Declaration. As the only Jew in the Cabinet at the time, Montagu could have been expected to support the idea of Palestine for the Jews. But Montagu being Montagu, he did the opposite. He passionately opposed the motion and submitted a memorandum to the Cabinet in which he said: "Zionism has always seemed to me to be a mischievous political creed, untenable by any patriotic citizen... I assert that there is not a Jewish nation... When the Jews are told that Palestine is their national home, every country will immediately desire to get rid of its Jewish citizens, and you will find a population in Palestine driving out its present inhabitants, taking all the best in the country... It is quite true that Palestine plays a large part in Jewish history, but so it does in modern Mohammedan history... I would say... that the Government will be prepared to do everything in their power to obtain for Jews in Palestine complete liberty of settlement and life on an equality with the inhabitants of that country who profess other religious beliefs. I would ask that the Government should go no further."

Montagu died prematurely, aged 45. His life was not happy. His marriage to Venetia Stanley was devoid of joy, it is said, because he was homosexual. If so, that was one matter about which he was not frank.

In Flagstaff House, Barrackpore, the riverside residence of the governor of West Bengal, stands a statue of Edwin Samuel Montagu, brooding over some matter, problem or dilemma. The inscription on its pedestal says, simply, of its tenant: "...amidst great events greatly served the Empire and the people of India..."

Gopal Krishna Gandhi is distinguished professor of history and politics, Ashoka University  
The views expressed are personal

### newsmaker

VIDYA BALAN Actor

I AM OPEN TO WORKING IN THE WEST OR ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD WHERE THERE IS A COMPELLING STORY TO TELL AND WHERE I AM OFFERED AN EXTREMELY EXCITING PART. BUT, HONESTLY, I HAVEN'T MADE ANY EFFORTS TOWARDS THAT.

### WHAT SHE REALLY MEANT

IN THIS AGE OF CONNECTIVITY AND TECHNOLOGY ONE CAN WORK IN ANY INDUSTRY FROM ANYWHERE. WHAT MATTERS TO ME IS A GOOD ROLE.



### WHAT SHE DEFINITELY DIDN'T

IF IT'S BASED ON TALENT, I WOULD BE THE FIRST FEMALE ACTOR TO WORK IN THE WEST. OTHERS HAVE GOT A CHANCE BECAUSE I HAVEN'T THROWN MY HAT IN THE RING YET.

## Will Akhilesh Yadav beat anti-incumbency?

If the chief minister forms the government, he'll be the first in the state's electoral history to win two consecutive terms

Sunita Aron

The animated poll narratives in Uttar Pradesh had a mix of divisive and development issues this time. But the debate on the recent trend of states returning incumbent chief ministers in the country for their good work was lost in the public spat over 'shamshan' and 'kabaristan'.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had been out of power for 14 years and was desperate to win UP — the adopted state of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. But the SP and the BSP, who had been alternately ruling the state, posed major hurdles.

As there was no visible work that the party could showcase in UP barring demonetisation, Amit Shah raved about states such as Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, which had returned their incumbent chief ministers Shivraj Singh Chauhan and Raman Singh respectively. Shah described it as a reward for their good governance and promised to develop UP on the same lines.

However, throwing a spanner in their efforts was Akhilesh Yadav, the young chief

minister, who had silenced his critics by executing big development projects over his five-year turbulent tenure. He often demanded to know if any other state in the country could show one project as big as the Metro Rail and Agra-Lucknow Expressway that they had completed in their tenure.

While joining the debate, Akhilesh repeatedly told people about the prevailing trend of repeating chief ministers in the country. His one-liner was: "This election would prove if people voted for caste or for their aspirations."

He knew Uttar Pradesh's penchant for change rather than continuity in every election. The state has had 20 chief ministers since January 26, 1950. These include political giants such as Govind Ballabh Pant, Sampurnanand and CB Gupta. Of them, only five chief ministers could enjoy more than one term: Charan Singh, Narain Dutt Tiwari, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Mayawati and Kalyan Singh.

Traditionally, UP has never repeated an incumbent chief minister. But apart from ND Tiwari of the Congress, who is lauded

for his development work, perhaps for the first time, an incumbent chief minister is being hailed for the work he has done for the state and is in the race for the crown again. Bucking anti-incumbency, Akhilesh Yadav became the driving force for the Congress-Samajwadi Party alliance with poll partner and Congress vice president Rahul Gandhi publicly lauding the development works undertaken by his government. All surveys billed him as the most popular chief minister of the state. Surprisingly, even those who had made up their mind to vote against the Samajwadi Party wanted a second term for him. Roadside conversations with people often revealed a vote for Modi and support for Akhilesh Yadav.

Whether Uttar Pradesh will break the tradition of bringing a new face every election or give him a second term will be known on March 11. It's another matter that many BJP supporters, even if they celebrate the SP's defeat and BJP's victory, will openly sympathise with him, if Akhilesh fails to get a second chance.

saron@hindustantimes.com

### bigdeal SHREYAS NAVARE



navare.shreyas@gmail.com

### anotherday

NAMITA BHANDARE

## Indian women @ work

While increasing paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks is a laudable step, it also reinforces the stereotype that child-rearing is a woman's job. In fact, some activists fear that giving women six months off from work will become an obstacle to their career advancement

**F**ifty-nine years ago when my mother, a full-fledged lawyer with a fledgling practice, got married, she declared that she would no longer work. In her worldview, careers and marriages were simply incompatible.

Just how much has changed — or not — became clear with a new survey that finds that while many women want both careers and time at home, a significant number only want to stay home.

The first survey of this magnitude — some 149,000 men and women across 142 countries — looks at attitudes to work. The largest numbers (41%), want a paying job and time at home, finds the study by the International

Labor Organization and Gallup. But only 29% of women globally want full-time paid jobs while 27% want to stay home.

The findings tie in with India where 30% want paid jobs. But the numbers who want to stay home are significantly higher at 41%, with only 22% who want both.

The survey comes at a time when India's female labour force participation has been declining from 35% in 1990 to 27% in 2014. Ironically, the number of girls with more than 10 years of schooling has been increasing from 22.3% in 2005 to 35.7% in 2015.

Among G20 nations, we hover above Saudi Arabia with only 27% of women aged 15 and older in the workforce, finds an IMF paper. And 25 million women have left the workforce in the past decade finds data analysis website IndiaSpend.

You would imagine that unprecedented economic growth post liberalisation, not to mention greater educational attainment, would result in more women in paid jobs. In fact, the opposite has happened.

It's a mystery that has vexed economists and policy-walas, and while there's no definitive answer, there are several theories.

In October, a team of Harvard faculty researchers questioned single, rural women aged between 18 and 25 to find that family and marriage were cited as the biggest constraints to paid work.

Balancing paid work with family life is a challenge all women face. But only in India, found a survey, do women spend 298 minutes a day cooking, cleaning and looking after kids and parents, compared to a pathetic 19 minutes a day spent on similar work by men.

When the burden of unpaid care work falls so disproportionately on women, is there any time to work outside the house? If anything, rising family incomes are likely to result in women opting out of the workforce so that they can "take better care of their homes".

There are other reasons: Not enough flexible options or unsafe public transport and harassment at workplace. Gender pay gaps are also a deterrent. The latest Monster Salary Index report finds that Indian men earn 25% more than women. The biggest gaps are not just in traditional sectors like manufacturing but also in newer sectors like information and communication technology. Unequal pay for the same work tells us

how we as a society value men and women. But the benefits of getting more women into paid work accrue not just to GDP but to women themselves: If she's viewed as a productive economic asset, her prestige increases and so does the investment in her education and health.

Yet, nothing will change unless we first change social attitudes to unpaid care work. So, while increasing paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks is a laudable step, it reinforces the stereotype that child-rearing is a woman's job (those who say men cannot breastfeed have clearly never heard of a breast pump). Some fear that giving women six months off from work will become an obstacle to their career advancement.

When a significant proportion of women say they want to stay home, the message is clear: Gender stereotypes about unpaid care work and a woman's place in it remain prevalent. My mother grappled with this 59 years ago. The fact that her grand-daughters still have to, should be deeply troubling.

Namita Bhandare is gender editor, Mint  
The views expressed are personal  
@namitabhandare

### innervoice

Only wise people can make the world a happy place

Sarban Sen

My travels across the world, be it the wilderness of Africa, or in the diverse terrain of Asia, or even the natural beauties in Europe, have all nudged me to ponder on the human journey from womb to tomb. My profession as a doctor has confirmed my belief that human beings possess an urge to live on and survive all kinds of struggle and hardships.

I also discovered that across diversities of geography, religion, culture, creed and race, human aspirations remain the same — to be happy, healthy and recognised.

The most important teaching for the human mind from childhood should be learning to look within, and learn to treat others the way they themselves want to be treated. Wise people contribute towards welfare and well-being of individuals and communities. The decisions they take, are in everyone's interest. It's always win-win. Wisdom drives mankind towards the right path. It leads to right actions and therefore prevents the person and society at large from harm and destruction. Wisdom is the key for everything. It brings logic and understanding of situations. It evokes actions and responses which are acceptable and tolerable to all. It can help bridge a number of gaps. Gaps of generation, beliefs, cultures and religion and bring individuals and communities closer at all levels — local, regional and global. Every drop of wisdom in this ocean of humanity will make the world happy and peaceful.

Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers.  
The views expressed are personal  
innervoice@hindustantimes.com