Representing Diversity in Institutions of Governance

Actual representational outcomes defy any presumption that institutional design, party political processes and electoral systems collectively contribute to making the institutions and structures of governance more representative. In this chapter, we examine – in common with the other country-studies in this research project – the representational outcomes in three such institutions, the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Indian Parliament; the Union Cabinet; and the central bureaucracy. In the first and last of these, as has been noted, there is quota-based representation for members of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, while in the second such representation remains a matter of convention. What does institutional design tell us about the actual representational patterns that result?

Patterns of representation in the Indian Parliament

The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes are the only social groups (other than the Anglo-Indians who have a fixed number of two seats) that are eligible for reservation in the legislatures, both central and state. This gives to these groups a guaranteed place in the lower house of the Parliament, as also of the state legislatures. As such, the representational outcomes in the case of these groups, in the particular case of the legislature, can hardly yield any surprising results. Hence, the outcomes in the case of these groups must be assessed in somewhat different terms, in terms of policy outcomes. Five decades after independence, however, it has become abundantly clear that despite representation in the legislatures, the policy outcomes for these groups have been woefully inadequate. (Weiner, 2001:211ff.) What Anne Phillips has called ‘the politics of presence’ have not
translated into effective representation such as would enable the empowerment of these groups. While some of the early studies on the impact of dalit legislators suggested that they were more likely than others to support agenda of equity, and were active in pushing for reservations (Galanter, 1984:53), more recent evidence suggests a less optimistic conclusion. Dalit legislators have not been particularly effective on issues like atrocities against these communities, or the effective implementation of the law against untouchability. It is mostly dalits who participate in debates on dalit issues, and even those MPs belonging to the BSP (which claims to represent them, and whose leadership is dalit) have not been particularly active in parliamentary debates. Their concerns have tended to be short-term in nature, mostly confined to questions regarding funds for welfare activities, unfilled vacancies in government departments and public sector jobs. They have been much less concerned with more long-term capability enhancing policy initiatives such as in the areas of health and education, or – most crucially – land reform. Few dalits, it is observed, have competed for power within the parliamentary party and the legislature. They are on the whole less likely to hold party offices or ministerships, to talk to ministers or serve on parliamentary committees. (Kumar, 2004)

Muslims have been consistently under-represented in Parliament, if their proportion in the population is taken as the decisive criterion. In the first Lok Sabha, elected in 1952, they constituted 4.4% of the house, and in the current Lok Sabha they stand at 6.44%. The highest representation achieved by Muslims was in 1980, when they constituted 9.2% of Lok Sabha members. Table 6.1 details Muslim representation in the Lok Sabha for the period preceding that for which data have been generated in this paper.

This under-representation may be explained by inferring from Lijphart’s argument (that the FPTP system does not disfavour minorities that are geographically concentrated), that FPTP disfavours minorities that are not geographically concentrated. This is borne out by a disaggregation of the results of the 2004 election, in which 35 Muslims were elected to the Lok Sabha. Approximately one-third (11) of these were elected from constituencies where the Muslim population is over 40%; another one-third were elected from constituencies where Muslims account for 20% to 30% of the population; and the remaining 12 from constituencies where the Muslim population is below 20%. (Jayal, 2004) The geographical concentration of the Muslim population is thus clearly a factor of some importance in winning seats, and its