

# ISAS Insights

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## **An Analysis of the Social Composition of the Indian Parliament**

*This paper explores the changing social composition of India's Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) beginning from its first term in 1952 until the current or 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha, which began its term in 2014. The paper looks at five distinct social characteristics of the members of parliament – age, occupation, education, caste and gender – and links transformations over time in these variables to the performance of the parliament and the larger narrative of its dysfunctionality.*

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Much of the analysis of the parliament of India is dominated by the frequency of disruptions and their impact on productivity. The amount of time lost due to disruptions has steadily risen from five per cent of working time in the 11<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) [1996-97] to 39 per cent in the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (2009-14). In fact, nearly 80 per cent of the working time in the Lok Sabha was lost due to disruptions during the 2018 Budget session,<sup>2</sup> which does not bode well for the monsoon session that began on 18 July 2018. In popular discourse, the frequency of disruptions is often linked to the changing political composition

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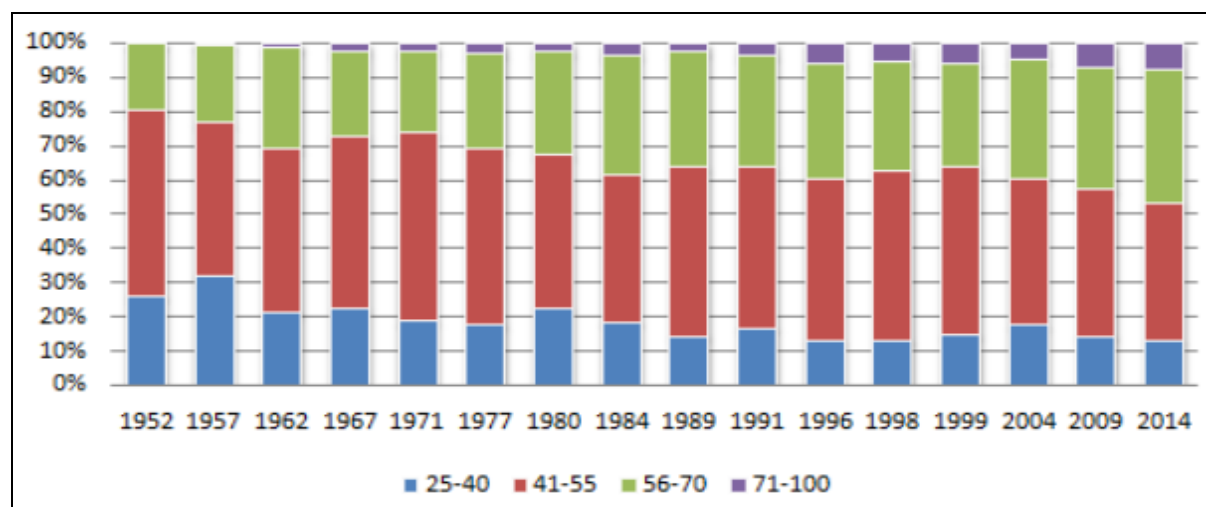
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<sup>2</sup> Session Track (Budget Session 2018). <http://www.prsindia.org/sessiontrack/budget-session018/productivity>. Accessed 7 August 2018.

of the parliament, which is seen as a reflection of a fragmented polity. The most obvious change has been the evolution of the Lok Sabha, from one dominated by the Congress to the first non-Congress government in 1977, and, from the late-1980s, the formation of minority and, later, coalition governments. In the first Lok Sabha (1952-57), the Congress won 364 of the 489 seats. In 1977, following the national Emergency imposed by then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for two years, the Congress won only 154 of the 536 seats, with the Janata Party winning a majority 295 seats. Though the Congress had a huge majority in the 8<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (1984-89), riding on a sympathy wave after Indira Gandhi's assassination, it was never able to regain its dominance since. The short-lived 9<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (1989-91) was the first where no party could muster a majority ushering in the era of coalitions. Though the Congress formed a minority government in the 10<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (1991-96), from 1996 onwards, it has been a battle between the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Both parties have not been able to form governments on their own until 2014, when the BJP won a single party majority, but have stitched together coalitions with regional parties. This paper, however, looks beyond the political composition of the parliament and examines the changing social composition of the Lok Sabha. We look at members of parliament (MPs) through five categories – age, occupation, education, caste and gender. In doing so, we look for clues linking the changes in social composition to the performance of the parliament and the larger narrative of its dysfunctionality.

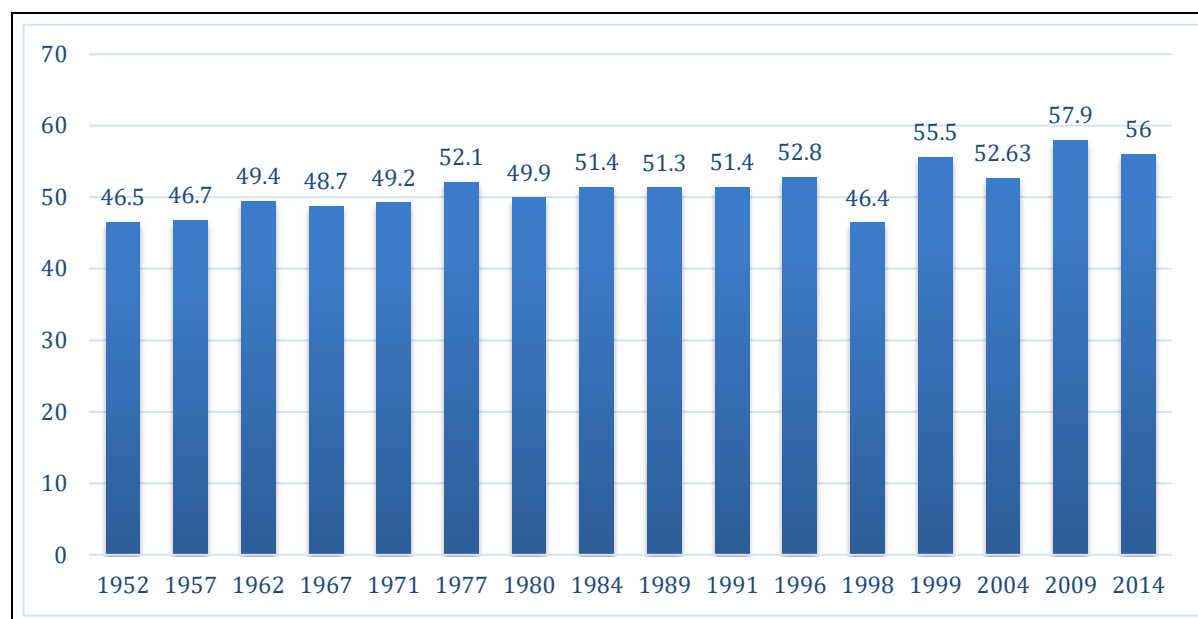
## Age

**Figure 1: Age Profile of Members of Lok Sabha**



Source: PRS Profile of 16th Lok Sabha. Link: <http://www.prsindia.org/media/media-updates/profile-of-the-16th-lok-sabha-3276/>

**Figure 2: Average Age of Members of Lok Sabha**



Source: PRS Legislative Research. Note: Data for 16th Lok Sabha is as of November 2016.

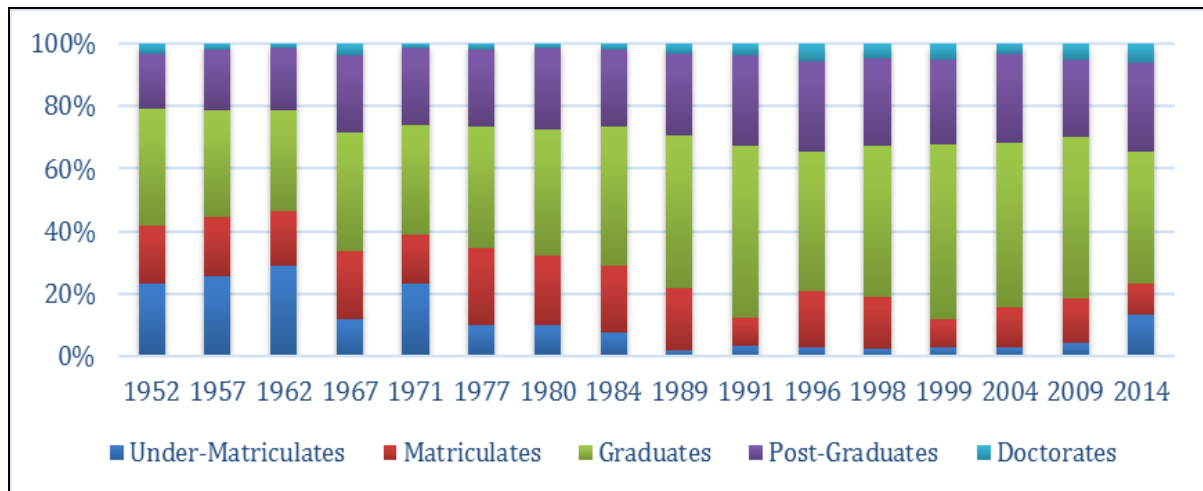
The average age of the MPs has increased from 46.5 years during the first Lok Sabha to 56 years in the current or 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (see Figure 2). The 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha was the oldest in independent India, with an average age of 57.9 years, followed by the current Lok Sabha. The average age of Indian MPs, in fact, is considerably higher than MPs in Britain, which is currently 51 years.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the median age of Indian MPs at 58 years is more than double the current median age in India, which is 27 years. MPs aged 56-70 years have the highest share of seats – 44 per cent – in the current Lok Sabha (see Figure 1), while this demographic accounts for only eight per cent of the total population. Thus, we have a situation where India, one of the youngest nations in the world, has elected representatives who are considerably older. One of the questions this raises is whether MPs are out of touch with the aspirations of the youth. While this is not a hypothesis that can be easily tested, what can be ascertained is whether the younger MPs are more productive in the parliament than the older MPs. If we use metrics such as attendance, questions asked and debate participation, we find that, on average, older MPs perform their parliamentary functions more conscientiously than younger MPs. This could be due to the fact that older MPs are more experienced and familiar with parliamentary procedures. They are also more likely to be nominated by their party to take part in debates.

<sup>3</sup> Cassie Barton and Lukas Audickas, 'Social Background of MPs 1979-2017,' *House of Commons Library Briefing Paper* (Number 7483), 28 September 2016.

The other important fact to note about the Indian parliament is that younger MPs tend to be overwhelmingly from ‘dynastic’ political families. While dynasty is not something that can always be easily identified, some scholars have devised ways of defining and mapping dynastic links.<sup>4</sup> An analysis of the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha came up with the startling result that all the MPs under the age of 30 were dynastic or hereditary MPs.<sup>5</sup> (French, 119) This implies that barriers to contesting and winning elections, particularly the high financial costs, remain very significant for young candidates and those from families that have prior links to politics have a better chance of winning elections.

## Education

**Figure 3: Educational Background of Members of Lok Sabha**



Source: *Parliament of India: The Fifteenth Lok Sabha (2009-2014)*; *PRS Profile of 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha*.

Note: For 10<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha, undergraduates and graduates have been taken together.

In terms of education, it is not surprising that the educational qualifications of MPs have shown a gradual and consistent rise, along with the rise of literacy levels in India, which stood at 12 per cent at the time of independence and was 74 per cent in 2011.<sup>6</sup> The number of graduates in the parliament has risen while the number of MPs who did not finish school (under matriculates in Indian terminology) and those with school leaving certificates (matriculates) has fallen. Hence, 75 per cent of the MPs elected in the 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha have, at least, a graduate degree, compared to 37 per cent in the first Lok Sabha. Conversely, the

<sup>4</sup> Kanchan Chandra ed., *Democratic Dynasties: State, Party and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Patrick French, *India: A Portrait* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011), p. 119.

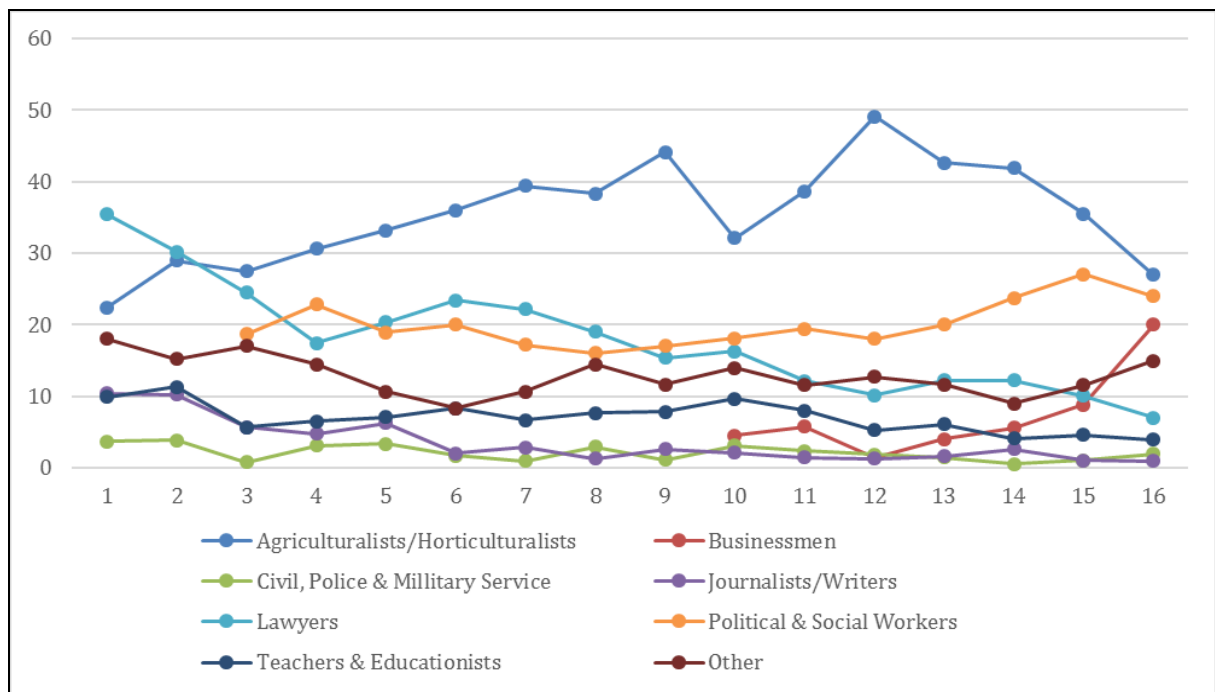
<sup>6</sup> Census of India 2011. *Literacy in India*. <https://www.census2011.co.in/literacy.php>. Accessed on 7 July 2018.

number of MPs who did not finish school has fallen considerably from the first three Lok Sabhas where they made up nearly a quarter of the House (see Figure 3).

However, one of the quirks of the current Lok Sabha is the number of MPs who do not have a matriculate degree, which is considerably higher at 13 per cent, compared to around four per cent in the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha. While there is no good reason for this uptick in the number of under matriculates, one of the notable aspects is that there is no positive relationship between the level of education and parliamentary performance. Again, using metrics such as attendance, questions asked and debate participation, we find that MPs with lower educational qualifications are on a par with those who are more highly qualified. Indeed, this, to some extent, debunks the popular perception that less educated representatives are a threat to parliamentary functioning and democracy. The quality of interventions by MPs with different educational backgrounds though is difficult to quantify and assess.

## Occupation

**Figure 4: Occupational Background of Members of Lok Sabha**



Source: Parliament of India: The Fifteenth Lok Sabha (2009-2014); PRS Profile of 16 Lok Sabha.

Note: The figures are in percentage.

According to Figure 4, one of the most significant changes in the occupational background of members of Lok Sabha is the dramatic decline in the number of lawyers who are being

elected. Lawyers predictably constituted a third of the MPs in the first parliament, given their leading role in the nationalist movement. This has fallen to only seven per cent in the current Lok Sabha. At the same time, the percentage of MPs classified as ‘agriculturalists/horticulturalists’ shot up from 22.5 per cent in the first Lok Sabha to a high of 49 per cent in the 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha, making it the most popular occupation. As one study noted, the parliament had undergone a “basic transfer of power from the urban middle class, as represented by the legal profession, to the rural agricultural class.”<sup>7</sup> While this meant that there was a bigger presence in the Lok Sabha of people who had some connection with agriculture or farming, it did not necessarily mean that these MPs were any less educated or less well off than those who were professionals since ‘agriculturalists’ could also mean large landowners as well as those living in cities but owning farm land. The figure though has gone down in the current Lok Sabha to around 27 per cent, but still remains the most popular occupation of the MPs. Another category that has shown a jump is the category of ‘political/social worker’, which was insignificant in the first and second Lok Sabha (1957-62) but has become more prominent from the fourth Lok Sabha (1967-70) onwards. In the current Lok Sabha, they make up nearly a quarter of the MPs. While the category is a fuzzy one, since very often MPs might have another primary occupation, the rising number of MPs who are political/social workers could signify a rise in the number of representatives for whom politics is a full-time vocation. This number is higher than that in Britain where currently 17 per cent of MPs actually list their occupation as ‘politicians’ or ‘political organisers’.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the other category that has increased dramatically in recent times is that of businesspersons, who make up 20 per cent of the current Lok Sabha. Interestingly, up to the 9<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha, no MP identified himself/herself as a businessperson though the category traders/industrialists existed, constituting 12 per cent of the first parliament. The rise in the number of businesspersons in the Lok Sabha is in tune with other democracies. In Britain, for example, nearly 31 per cent of MPs are businesspersons.<sup>9</sup> This is partly a reflection of the high costs of contesting and winning elections. It also brings into focus the role of the conflict of interest in formulating legislation and policy.

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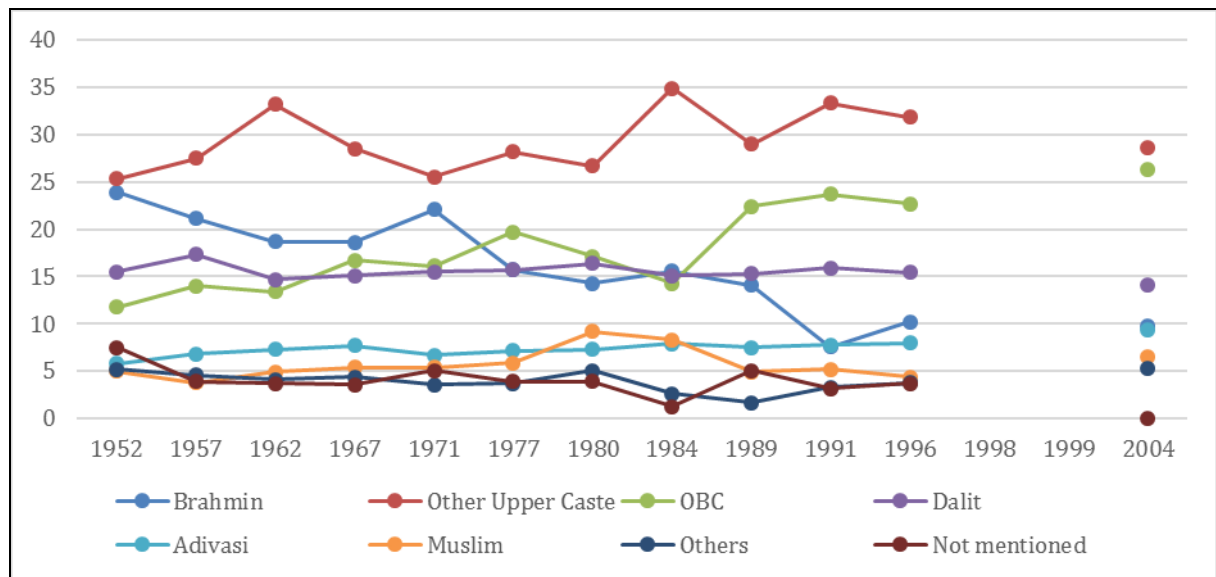
<sup>7</sup> V A Pai Panandikar and A Sud, *Emerging Pattern of Representation in the Indian Parliament* (New Delhi: Centre for Policy Research, 1981), p. 99.

<sup>8</sup> Barton and Audickas, ‘Social Background of MPs 1979-2017’.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## Caste and Religion

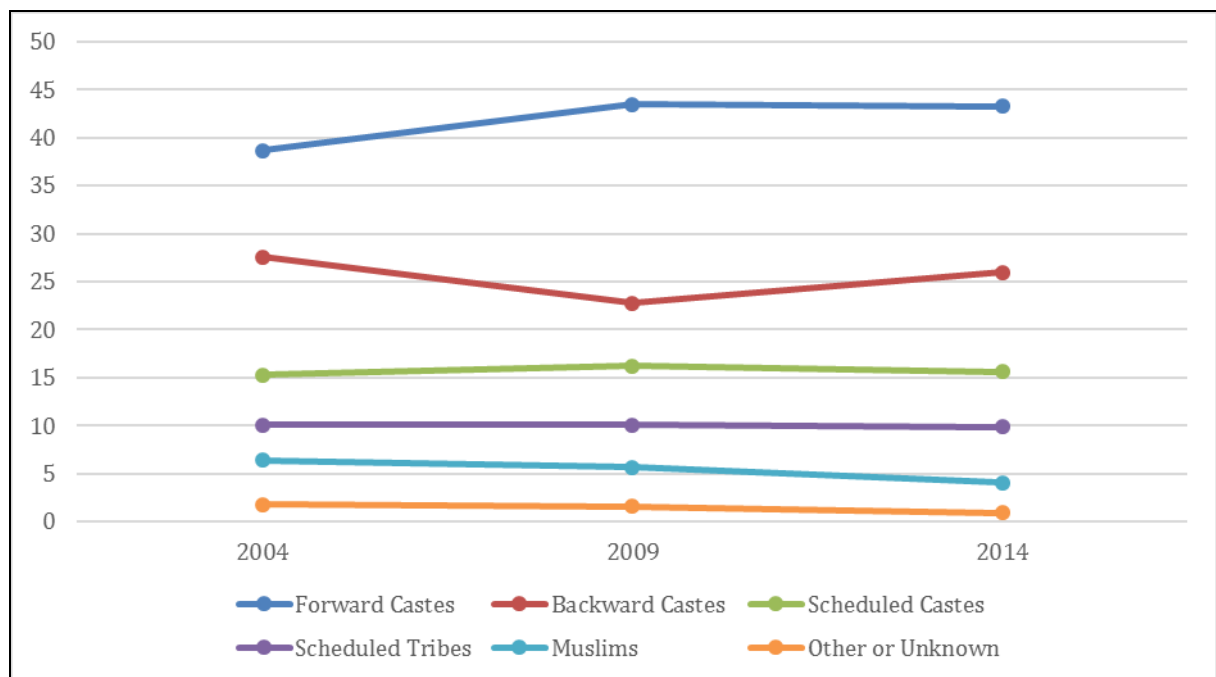
**Figure 5: Caste of Members of Lok Sabha (1952-2004)**



Source: CSDS.

Note: For the years 1998 and 1999, the caste of MPs are not available; all figures are in percentage.

**Figure 6: Caste of Members of Lok Sabha (2004-2014)**



Source: Chandra, Bohlken, and Chauchard 2014.

Note: Figures are in percentage.

Another significant change in the parliament is the caste composition of the Lok Sabha (see Figures 5 and 6). Not surprisingly, in the first three Lok Sabhas, the upper castes constituted nearly 50 per cent of the MPs. By the 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha, the percentage of upper caste MPs had dropped to below 40 per cent. In particular, the number of Brahmins, who made up nearly a

quarter of MPs in the first parliament, had declined dramatically to around 10 per cent by 2004. This mirrors the trend of the decline in prominent Brahmin leaders in Indian politics and a concomitant rise in the influence of other upper castes, such as Thakurs and Rajputs.

At the same time, the percentage of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) – a category that encompasses the lower castes but not the former untouchables or Scheduled Castes (SCs) – has progressively risen from 12 per cent in the first Lok Sabha to around 25 per cent in the 9<sup>th</sup> - a level at which it still remains. The doubling of the share of the OBCs in the parliament was a result of the forces unleashed by the Mandal Commission Report, which was tabled in the parliament in 1990 and recommended 27 per cent reservations for the OBCs. Political scientist Yogendra Yadav famously called this transformation the “third electoral system”, contrasting it to two earlier phases, when the Congress was dominant from 1952 to 1967 and from 1967 to 1989, as it began losing elections in several states to a united opposition.<sup>10</sup>

The percentage of SCs and Scheduled Tribes (STs) has, however, remained fairly steady, due to the system of reserved constituencies for SCs and STs. However, the percentage of Muslims in the parliament has consistently been lower than their share of the population, reaching a high of around 10 per cent in the 7<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha before declining subsequently. Indeed, in the current Lok Sabha, the share of Muslims in the parliament is the lowest ever at five per cent.

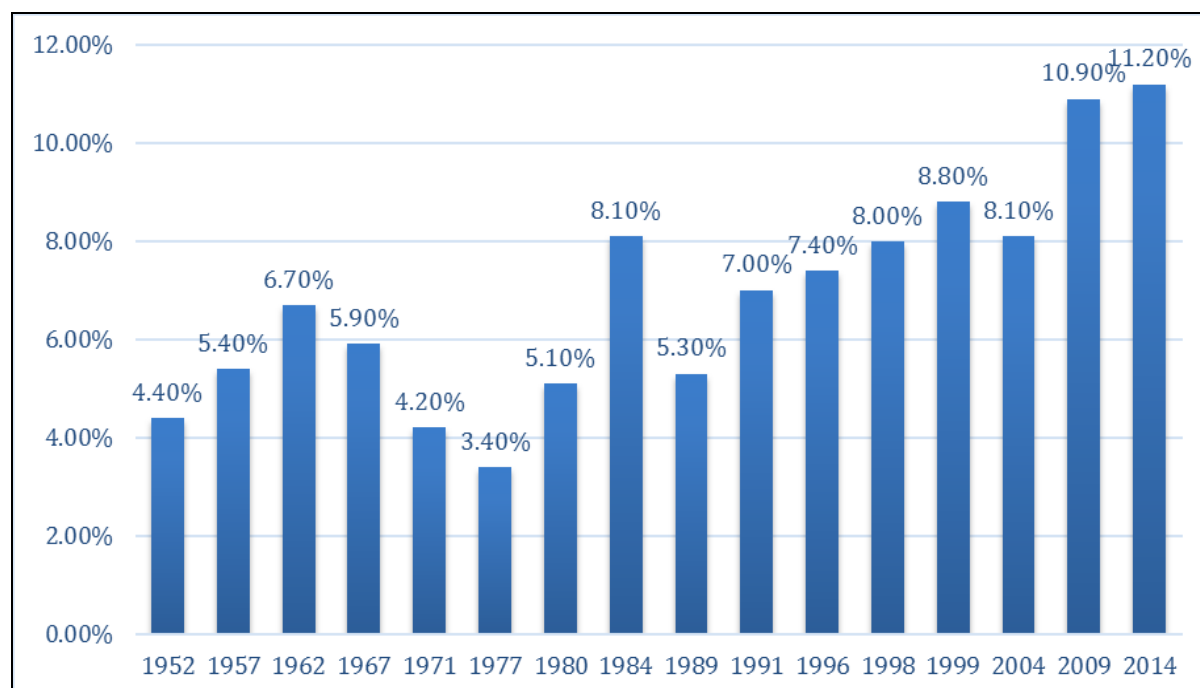
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<sup>10</sup> Yogendra Yadav, ‘Electoral Politics in the Times of Change: India’s Third Electoral System, 1989-99,’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34:34/35, 21 August – 3 September 1999.



## Gender

**Figure 7: Percentage of Women in Lok Sabha**



Source: Election Commission of India

Note: Including one nominated member

Figure 7 shows that the representation of women in Indian parliament has steadily risen from 4.4 per cent in the first Lok Sabha to a little over 11 per cent in the current Lok Sabha, which is the highest ever. While the first Lok Sabha in 1952 had only 22 elected women MPs out of a total of 489 MPs, the current Lok Sabha has 61 elected women MPs out of 543 members, reflecting a threefold increase. While this is a significant increase, the share of women MPs in the parliament is still much lower than the global average of 24 per cent as well as the Asian average of 20 per cent.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, many other South Asian countries, such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, have a higher proportion of women in the parliament at over 20 per cent.<sup>12</sup> One of the reasons for the numbers being low in India is that there is no reservation for women in Indian parliament, which exists in countries like Bangladesh<sup>13</sup> and Pakistan.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Archive.ipu.org. (2018). *Women in Parliaments: World and Regional Averages*. <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>. Accessed 26 June 2018.

<sup>12</sup> “Women in Parliament: Bangladesh ranks 8th in Asia”, *The Daily Star*, 27 November 2016. <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/women-parliament-bangladesh-ranks-8th-asia-1320952>. Accessed 26 June 2018.

<sup>13</sup> International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2016). *Women’s Reserved Seats in Bangladesh: A Systemic Analysis of Meaningful Representation*. <http://www.ifes.org/publications/womens-reserved-seats-bangladesh-systemic-analysis-meaningful-representation>. Accessed 7 August 2018.

<sup>14</sup> “Pakistan electoral reform plans aim to boost women’s participation in politics”, *Reuters*, 7 February 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-law-women/pakistan-electoral-reform-plans-aim-to-boost-women-participation-in-politics-idUSKBN15M1RU>. Accessed 7 August 2018.

The women's reservation bill has been in cold storage for many years. The situation has been compounded by the reluctance of Indian political parties to nominate more women to contest elections.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, the current parliament is very different from the ones during the early years of the Indian republic. Members unsurprisingly have much higher educational qualifications, but they are also older. The parliament has more women members, compared to the early years, but women continue to be grossly under-represented. Perhaps the most important changes are the caste composition and the occupational background of the MPs. The parliament is now much more diverse as well as more representative of Indian society and this has had an impact on the way the institution functions. There are many more OBC and lower caste representatives in the parliament, along with fewer lawyers. At the same time, the number of agriculturalists, businesspersons and political workers has increased significantly.

These changes are the likely reason for the post-independence consensus on British parliamentary norms and the functioning of the parliament having cracked since the late-1980s. As political scientist Ashutosh Varshney argued about the transformation in India from the 1980s, "Democracy has been substantially indigenized, and the shadow of Oxbridge has left India's political centre-stage."<sup>15</sup> This has led to literally a different language being spoken on the floor of the House with English increasingly sharing the stage with Hindi and the other regional languages. This indigenisation has also led to parliamentary practices, such as frequent disruptions, which were rare in the first three decades of independent India.

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<sup>15</sup> Ashutosh Varshney, 'Is India Becoming More Democratic?' *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59:1 (2000), p. 7.