# Transcript – [**India Tomorrow part 4**](https://theconversation.com/india-tomorrow-part-4-women-gender-and-love-116115) (begins 18.33 – ends 26.34 mins)

## Annabel Bligh:

When it comes to the world of politics, the way that caste intersects with gender also has big implications for women politicians.

## Indrajit Roy:

Yes, we can see this in someone like Mayawati, who is the leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party, or BSP.

## [**Carole Spary**](https://theconversation.com/profiles/carole-spary-119511)**:**

Mayawati’s very significant in different ways. She’s significant symbolically as a representative of the Dalit community.

## Annabel Bligh:

That’s Carole Spary, an assistant professor at Nottingham University who’s just co-authored a book with Shirin Rai, a professor at the University of Warwick, called [Performing Representation: Women members in the Indian Parliament](https://global.oup.com/academic/product/performing-representation-9780199489053?cc=gb&lang=en&).

## Indrajit Roy:

As Carole says, Mayawati is significant as a Dalit leader. Remember, Dalits are a group that have historically been oppressed as untouchables. From her very humble beginnings, Mayawati became chief minister of India’s biggest state, Uttar Pradesh, four times over the last 20 years. Her party, the BSP, is significant because it explicitly fights for Dalit rights and low-caste emancipation. The BSP has worked hard to ensure that Dalits, and members of other so-called low castes were not merely foot-soldiers of the Congress or the BJP, but could advance their own political voice.

So, the BSP may not be great at winning elections, especially outside Uttar Pradesh, but they do provide a means for Dalits to assert their public presence.

## Carole Spary:

The other thing when we talk about Dalit women and women in general – there’s such a wide variety. Women are … they might be Dalit, but they might be very different, they might have very different experiences. So, for example, when you compare Mayawati to Meira Kumar, for example, who was the first female speaker of the Lok Sabha, we see very different kind of backgrounds, very different careers in politics. So, on the one hand they might be Dalit women, but of course even among Dalit women, Dalit women are diverse as well.

## Indrajit Roy:

Meira Kumar, who Carole mentioned there, is also Dalit. She’s a Congress party politician. Her father was a former deputy prime minister – so she’s had a very different upbringing and background to perhaps the “average” Dalit woman.

## Annabel Bligh:

So there are some very high-profile women politicians in India’s parliament, the Lok Sabha. And there are women from a range of castes and parties. Sneha Krishnan explained how there are also lots of women who fit into the BJP’s Hindu nationalist mould.

## Sneha Krishnan:

And I think it would be a mistake to think of women as a singular category because Hindu nationalism has among its supporters certainly a lot of upper-caste, middle-class, urban women, upper-caste non-middle class, you know, non-urban women and so on. So on the one hand there’s the sort of *sadhvi* image, which is the image of the sort of renunciate woman. Right. So women who typically wear saffron robes and aren’t married and, you know, claim to live austere lives, and so on.

## Indrajit Roy:

A good example of someone referred to as a sadhvi is, Uma Bharati, the firebrand Hindutva leader, born into an impoverished rural family and from among the so-called “low castes”, who rises up the party ranks in the BJP to become chief minister of Madhya Pradesh State and is today a minister in Modi’s cabinet.

## Sneha Krishnan:

There’s also the sort of, you know, good married woman image, you know, Sushma Swaraj, for instance, was a substantially important politician within the BJP who embodied that. And, I mean, there have been female politicians who have sort of capitalised on these, you know, quite right-wing imaginaries of womanhood really to gain power.

## Annabel Bligh:

So women feature across the political spectrum. But the actual number of women politicians is still very low. Here’s Carole Spary again.

## Carole Spary:

The national parliament has never really got above 12% of MPs as women. And state level average is often less than this, about sort of 8%. So while there’s some very senior sort of individual women leaders in Indian politics, such as party leaders, chief ministers of some states, a former prime minister and parliamentary leaders like two female speakers of the lower house of parliament, when you look at the average MP or state level MLA, this is overwhelmingly male. And there’s a fairly depressing statistic that if you take all of the women MPs ever elected to the lower house of parliament, you would not fill a single Lok Sabha, you would not fill a single lower house of parliament, which is usually about 543 elected seats.

## Annabel Bligh:

It’s not that women aren’t engaging with politics. Carole says the number of women turning out to vote in elections has grown a significant amount in recent decades.

## Carole Spary:

And if you look at the general election by general election, slowly that gap between men and women’s voter turnout has narrowed over time. And my colleague Rajeshwari Deshpande in Pune University suggests that this indicates the arrival of a women’s constituency or a women’s vote. So this kind of essentially encourages politicians to learn and to understand and to appeal to women’s votes more and more because of their increasing turnout.

## Annabel Bligh:

In the 2014 national elections, voter turnout for men was 67% and for women it was 66% – so pretty high for both. Now, of course, both men and women politicians must – and do – represent both their male and female constituents. Nonetheless, this gender inequality at the highest level of politics is reflective of the gender inequality that exists in India.

## Indrajit Roy:

If India wants to see more women represented at the highest level of politics, there needs to be a wider cultural shift. Right now, Carole says there’s a reason politics is a male-dominated space and it ties into the kind of morality policing we were hearing about earlier, as well as the physical violence women face.

## Carole Spary:

There is a sense that women are often turned off going into politics because, there is a sense about what, you know, whether they would get aspersions cast on their character. Whether they’re … they call it character assassination – and there are examples, you know, where women candidates and MPs have faced those kinds of those kinds of problems.

So whether it’s character assassination, whether it is actually physical violence as well. I mean the online space as well as … I mean, as you know this is a problem around the world, the online space can also be very violent particularly for women in politics as well.

## Annabel Bligh:

Unless efforts are made to make politics more inclusive for women, Carole says, India is unlikely to see a big improvement in the number of women politicians working at the national level.

## Carole Spary:

At the same time, if that space is intimidating or if it’s violent – or if there are, you know, very real personal as well as professional costs to them in terms of, you know, family, integrity and reputation and all of those things, then actually it shouldn’t necessarily be the burden for women to accept those things in order to be able to participate. It should be the responsibility of those seeking to create a more democratic politics to actually address those kinds of issues, those kinds of problems. So, whether it’s the corruption or violence or the use of money in politics, intimidation, particularly gendered forms of violence, and gendered forms of intimidation, it shouldn’t necessarily be the cost for women to be in politics, it should be about trying to make democratic politics more inclusive for everybody.