



Exploring the Paradox: Women's Political Engagement and Underrepresentation in Indian Politics

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Abstract

The dynamic role of women in Indian politics presents a paradoxical picture. While they are a visible presence across all political levels, this visibility has not translated into substantial political empowerment across hierarchies. Examining women's participation in Indian politics, spanning from the 1952 General Elections to the present day, reveals a consistent pattern of growth in their voter participation and a narrowing gender gap in the electoral process. However, a notable under-representation of women persists at all political echelons.

This article undertakes a comprehensive analysis of women's political involvement and representation, tracing their journey from being constituents to voters, from aspiring candidates to political representatives. It argues that a complex interplay of social, cultural, and political factors contributes to a democratic deficit for women within the government. Despite their omnipresence in the political arena, their representation in crucial positions and at the highest decision-making levels remains disproportionately low.

While there has been an uptick in women's voter turnout in both assembly and general elections, the number of women actively participating as candidates in the electoral process remains limited, and the count of women legislators are even scarcer. Furthermore, this article delves into the enduring issue of underrepresentation of Muslim women in politics, highlighting the multiple layers of marginalization they face.

Additionally, the article addresses the contentious topic of reservations for women in local bodies and the political discourse surrounding the Women's Reservation Bill. By examining these intricate facets of women's political involvement, this article seeks to shed light on the complex challenges and opportunities that shape the landscape of women in Indian politics."

Key Words: *Elections, Political participation, Quota, Parliament, Women, India*



Introduction:

The active participation of women in the political sphere holds immense significance for the effective functioning of any political system. Their involvement in governance plays a pivotal role in ensuring the fairness and equity of government machinery. However, the extent and impact of women's political presence and participation are profoundly influenced by the prevailing societal and state dynamics.

The limited representation of women in the national decision-making process carries substantial implications. It means that the perspectives and voices of nearly half of the population remain excluded from the corridors of power. Despite the Indian state granting individual rights, many women in India still face barriers that hinder their access to these rights. Historical, social, and cultural factors have long obstructed women's unfettered participation in politics, thereby limiting their role in the decision-making sphere, which consequently fails to yield any substantial multiplier effect.

Regrettably, the number of women occupying formal decision-making positions has shown minimal growth over the years. The dearth of opportunities for women to engage in political bodies not only results in their meager representation but also leads to the neglect of their unique perspectives and experiences in the policy-making process. Statistical records paint a stark picture, revealing only marginal increases in the number of women candidates fielded during elections in recent decades."

Women's Representation at Diverse Political Levels:

In the framework of representative parliamentary democracy, women are afforded opportunities for political representation at various governance tiers. At the national level, this includes a parliamentary system comprising two chambers: the Rajya Sabha (Council of States) as the Upper House and the Lok Sabha (House of People) as the Lower House. At the state level, the structure is unicameral, with the Legislative Assembly serving as the Lower House and the Legislative Council as the Upper House. Further, the three-tiered Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) encompassing Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and Zilla Parishads facilitate local self-governance at the grassroots level. In urban areas and metropolitan cities, governance is administered by municipal bodies such as Nagara Palikas, Municipal Councils, and Municipal Corporations.

Representation of Women in Parliament & State Assemblies:

Despite the potential for women's representation within this framework, the actual figures reveal a sobering reality. In the Lok Sabha, the proportion of women in relation to the total



number of seats has seen only marginal increases over time, yet it has never surpassed 10 percent since the inaugural elections in 1952. The Rajya Sabha fares slightly better but has never exceeded 12 percent female representation. The scenario for Women Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) across all state assemblies in India is even more disheartening, with a national average of merely 9 percent. The states of Bihar, Rajasthan, and Haryana exhibit the highest female representation at 14 percent, while Pondicherry and Nagaland have no women MLAs at all. As of the 14th Lok Sabha, there are a total of 51 women MPs out of 543, and across all state assemblies, there are 280 women MLAs out of 4120. On average, fewer than one in ten legislators in parliament or state assemblies is a woman, comprising less than 10 percent of all MPs and less than 7 percent of all MLAs.

This reality paints a stark contrast when compared to global data on women in directly elected lower houses of national parliaments, as reported by the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The global average for women's representation in such parliaments stands at 22.4 percent, ranking India a discouraging 103rd among 190 countries. Countries like Algeria (31.6%), Iraq, South Sudan (26.5% each), and Saudi Arabia (19.9%) outperform India significantly in terms of women MPs, even in the face of strife, post-conflict reconstruction, or societal restrictions. Libya, ranked 44th, boasts 16 percent female representation. Among the SAARC nations, India ranks fifth regarding women parliamentarians. Nepal leads the group with 29.5 percent, followed by Afghanistan (27.7%), Pakistan, and Bangladesh (20% each). These countries achieve better women's representation primarily through constitutionally mandated quotas or reservations. Rwanda, for instance, enforces a 30% reservation, and most countries in the top 20 follow a similar trend. Closer to home, Nepal has a 29% legislated quota for women, while Afghanistan maintains 28%. Pakistan and Bangladesh reserve 20% of seats for women. In contrast, the Indian political landscape is still awaiting the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill, which was introduced in 1996, despite the existence of voluntary political party quotas in some European countries that actively encourage and ensure women's participation in the political process."

Women Empowerment in Local Self-Government:

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments Act brought about significant changes in the political scenario of the country with regard to women's participation in politics. More than 500 district panchayats, around 5,100 block/taluka panchayats and about 2, 25,000 village panchayats, 90 municipal corporations, 1,500 municipal councils, and 1,800 nagar panchayats jointly elected three million representatives and a considerable number of them



women. Article 243 D of the Constitution provides that not less than one-third of the total number of seats in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women including Chairpersons in every Panchayats and such seat may be allotted by rotation to different Constituencies/ Panchayats at each level. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment provided for the increased participation of women in the political institutions at the village, taluka and district level. This has enabled several women, who had never been in power and even those illiterate, to enter politics. There are 27, 82,293 elected representatives in Panchayats out of which 10, 42,282 are women which constitute to 37.46 %. In states like Kerala, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh, the number of women elected in panchayats is quite high.

Bringing women into politics through the Panchayat Raj Institutions system (PRI) was an act of positive discrimination. Crucially, PRI has helped to change women's perceptions of themselves. Women have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources, officials and, most of all, by challenging men. PRI has also given many women a greater understanding of the workings of politics, in particular the importance of political parties. PRI has given many women a greater understanding of the workings of politics, in particular the importance of political parties. PRI has helped to change local government beyond simply increasing the numerical presence of women. There is now a minority of women who are in politics because of their leadership qualities or feminist consciousness. Some of the ways in which women, through PRI, are changing governance are evident in the issues they choose tackle; water, alcohol abuse, education, health and domestic violence. Women are also taking action against child marriage and child domestic labour, whilst promoting girl-child education. As with education, women have used their elected authority to address quality health care as a critical issue.

Representation of Muslim Women in Lok Sabha:

Women are altogether ill-represented in the lower house (Lok Sabha) since independence. With respect to Muslim women this representation is even much worse. As for the representation of Muslim women in Lok Sabha, they have never crossed the mark of three. In six Lok Sabhas (1st, 4th, 5th, 9th, 10th and 12th), there was no Muslim woman MP. Like in the current 15th Lok Sabha, they were three Muslim women MP in 6th and 8th Lok Sabha. Of 549 women Lok Sabha members so far, only 18 have been Muslims. The low political representation of Muslim women reflects the low status of women within the Muslim community and wide scope for her socio-economic-political empowerment.



The Women's Reservation Bill: Addressing the Urgent Need:

In India, government and politics wield exceptional influence over economic, social, and power structures, surpassing many countries with stronger civil societies. Consequently, the marginalization of women in politics in India has far-reaching consequences. While women in several nations have been steadily progressing, India has witnessed a decline in women's political participation, both in terms of quantity and quality, as compared to earlier periods in its history. The presence of women in key political decision-making bodies, including Parliament and State Legislatures, remains alarmingly low. The limited space allocated to women in these political institutions and decision-making forums perpetuates inequalities and discrimination against women.

Numerous strategies have been proposed to bolster the political representation of women in India. One prominent proposal is the reservation of 33% of seats at various levels, including Parliament, and the suggestion that political parties reserve 33% of their electoral seats for women. In pursuit of this goal, the Constitution (Eighty-first Amendment) Bill, 1996, commonly known as the Women's Reservation Bill, was introduced on September 12, 1996. This bill sought to reserve one-third of the total number of seats filled through direct elections in the House of the People and in Legislative Assemblies of the States for women.

However, the battle for increased representation of women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies has been marred by disruptions, physical altercations, and slogan-shouting. Governments since 1996 have attempted, unsuccessfully, to pass the Women's Reservation Bill in Parliament due to a lack of consensus across the political spectrum. The absence of affirmative action, an inhospitable environment that hinders women's participation in state assemblies and parliament, nullifies the exercise of women's right to political participation and obstructs their enjoyment of socio-economic rights. It is undeniable that democracy and representation will be fortified with the mandatory inclusion of more women through reservation. The impact of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, guaranteeing 33% reservation of seats for women in local bodies (panchayats) in India, underscores this point, as it has led to a steady increase in women's representation at the local level. Unless women are directly integrated into decision-making processes, vital women's issues will continue to be insufficiently addressed."

Conclusion:

Despite the Indian Constitution's assurance of political equality for all, women have not fully realized this right. When compared to men, women's engagement in formal political



processes and their representation in key bodies such as the Lok Sabha, Rajyasabha, and State Legislatures remain conspicuously low. The prevailing political landscape remains male-centric, creating an environment less conducive to active female participation. To rectify this gender imbalance and advance gender equality, it is imperative to encourage and facilitate women's active involvement in the formal political process.

The call for reserved seats in legislatures and party structures has gained prominence in India as a means of ensuring equitable representation. Overcoming the persistent underrepresentation of women necessitates the swift establishment of a broader political consensus in favor of women's reservation. Moreover, addressing the concerning lack of political representation among Muslim women must be integrated into this overarching framework of reservation.

The policy of reserving seats for women in political bodies serves a dual purpose: not only does it bolster their representation in parliament and state legislatures, but it also provides them with opportunities to participate in vital decision-making processes. By doing so, it counters the gender imbalance that has permeated various facets of development

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