



The role of Indian women in politics: Trends, barriers, and prospects

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Abstract

India, the world's largest democracy, has witnessed a gradual yet uneven increase in women's political participation over the past seven decades. Despite constitutional guarantees, legal reforms and targeted policy interventions, women remain significantly underrepresented in formal political institutions—from local self-government bodies to national legislatures. This paper analysed the historical evolution, constitutional and legal frameworks and empirical trends that shape women's engagement in Indian politics. Drawing on feminist institutionalism, political socialization, and intersectionality frameworks, the study analyses the impact of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, the proposed Women's Reservation Bill (Nari Shakti Vandan Act), and grassroots initiatives such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs) on women's political empowerment. The paper also identifies persistent structural, cultural, and institutional barriers—including gender norms, caste-class hierarchies, and party politics—that impede women's entry and advancement in politics. By synthesising secondary data from the Election Commission of India, national surveys, and scholarly literature, the research underscores the need for comprehensive reforms that go beyond numerical reservation to address substantive representation and transformative leadership in Indian democracy.

Keywords: Women in Indian politics, political representation in India, constitutional amendments, political reservation

Introduction

The political empowerment of women is a cornerstone of democratic governance and sustainable development. In India, where the Constitution guarantees equality and prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex (Article 15), the reality of women's political participation has been mixed. While women have historically exercised informal political influence—through community networks, caste panchayats and religious movements—their presence in formal decision-making structures has lagged far behind gender parity goals (Mazumdar, 2019) ^[15]. The post-independence era saw the emergence of women leaders at the national level (e.g., Indira Gandhi, Pratibha Patil), yet the aggregate statistics reveal a stark disparity: as of 2023, women constitute only 14.4% of the Lok Sabha and 11% of the Rajya Sabha (Election Commission of India, 2023). At the state level, the picture is equally sobering, with women holding barely 9% of seats in legislative assemblies (Singh, 2022) ^[19].

Historical Developments

The struggle for political rights in India was intrinsically linked to the anti-colonial movement. Women such as Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Vijayalakshmi Pandit participated in the Indian National Congress and advocated for suffrage rights (Smrithi, 2020) ^[20]. Following independence in 1947, the Constitution granted universal adult franchise, enabling women to vote and stand for election. However, the early decades saw limited numerical advancement: the first Lok Sabha (1952) included only 5% women representatives (Ghosh, 2012) ^[9].

During the 1970s and 1980s, the emergence of women chief ministers (e.g., Nandini Satpathy in Odisha, Janaki Ramachandran in Tamil Nadu) signalled a gradual opening of political spaces, albeit often within patriarchal party structures. The 1990s marked a turning point with the passage of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which mandated reservation for women in local

self-government bodies, popularly known as panchayats and municipalities (Jha & Verma, 2020) ^[10]. These reforms were pivotal in normalising women's presence in politics at the grassroots level and creating a pipeline of female leaders who later transitioned to higher electoral offices (Baviskar & Tatke, 2000) ^[3].

Theoretical Framework

Three analytical lenses guide this study.

1. Feminist Institutionalism stresses that formal institutions (e.g., electoral rules, party statutes) and informal norms (e.g., gender stereotypes, clientelism) jointly shape women's opportunities for political recruitment (Mackay *et al.*, 2010) ^[13]. In the Indian context, the interaction between the reservation system and entrenched patriarchal practices illustrates this dynamic.
2. Political Socialisation examines how early-life experiences—family, education, community—instill political attitudes and capacities (Easton & Dennis, 1969) ^[6]. In India, gendered socialisation often discourages women from pursuing public leadership, thereby limiting the pool of potential candidates (Kishor, 2000) ^[12].
3. Intersectionality highlights how overlapping identities—such as being a Dalit woman or a Muslim woman—compound marginalisation in political spaces (Patel, 2021) ^[17]. Empirical studies show that women from Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) face compounded barriers compared to their upper-caste counterparts (Desai, 2015) ^[5].

By integrating these perspectives, it is generalized that, both structural enablers and sociocultural constraints that influence women's political trajectories in India.

Constitutional and Legal Framework

The Indian Constitution contains several provisions aimed at promoting gender equality:

- Articles 14 and 15 prohibit state discrimination on grounds of sex and allow affirmative action for women.
- Article 16 guarantees equal opportunity in public employment, enabling women's access to bureaucratic and judicial posts.
- Article 325 ensures equal representation in electoral rolls, while Article 326 entitles all citizens, regardless of gender, to vote.
- Beyond the Constitution, specific legislative measures have sought to increase women's political participation:
- The 73rd Amendment (1992) reserved one-third of seats for women in gram panchayats (village councils) and mandated the creation of a Women's Committee in each gram sabha (Jha & Verma, 2020) ^[10].
- The 74th Amendment (1992) extended similar reservation to municipalities, aiming to deepen women's participation in urban local bodies.
- The Women's Reservation Bill (originally introduced in 1996 and later re-titled the *Nari Shakti Vandan Act*) proposes one-third reservation for women in the Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies, and the Legislative Council. Although not yet enacted, the Bill has spurred debate on the efficacy of "quotas within quotas" for marginalised groups (Rao, 2018) ^[18].
- These instruments have created a legal scaffolding, yet their implementation remains uneven, with compliance varying across states (Mahajan, 2015) ^[14].

Women in Local Governance: The Panchayati Raj System

The 73rd Amendment is widely regarded as a landmark in India's gender-inclusive governance. By 2022^[16], women occupied approximately 1.3 million seats in gram panchayats, representing roughly 44 % of total panchayat memberships (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2022) ^[16]. However, several patterns emerge from the data:

1. **Descriptive Representation vs. Substantive Representation:** While women constitute a critical mass in many panchayats, studies indicate that their actual decision-making authority is often mediated by male relatives or local elites (Kabeer, 2005) ^[11]. In many villages, women's "token" presence coexists with male dominance over agenda-setting and resource allocation (Mazumdar, 2019) ^[15].
2. **Caste and Class Dimensions:** Women from higher castes and wealthier households are more likely to be nominated as pradhans (heads) than their Scheduled Caste or tribal counterparts (Desai, 2015) ^[5]. Intersectional analysis reveals that Dalit women often occupy "reserved" seats but remain marginalised within the council's dynamics (Patel, 2021) ^[21].
3. **Capacity Building:** Government programmes such as the *Panchayat Mahila Evam Yuva Shakti* (Panchayat Mahila and Youth) have attempted to train women panchayat members in governance, financial management, and leadership. Evaluations suggest that training improves women's confidence and effectiveness, yet limited budgetary allocations constrain scaling (World Bank, 2020) ^[22].

Overall, the panchayat system has generated a "political laboratory" wherein women acquire experiential learning, build networks, and, in some cases, ascend to higher electoral offices (Baviskar & Tatke, 2000) ^[3]. Nonetheless, the translation of descriptive gains into substantive policy influence remains an ongoing challenge.

Women in State and National Politics

State Legislative Assemblies

Women's representation in state legislatures remains low. In 2022^[16], the average proportion of women MLAs across all state assemblies was about 9 % (Singh, 2022) ^[19]. Notable exceptions include Rajasthan (14 %) and Kerala (11 %), where targeted party nominations and women's wings have facilitated greater entry (Choudhry, 2017) ^[4].

State-level data also highlight the intersection of caste and gender: parties often field women candidates from marginalised communities to satisfy both gender and caste reservation requirements, a practice that can either empower or instrumentalise these women (Rao, 2018) ^[18].

Parliament

The Lok Sabha has seen a modest increase from 5 % in 1952 to 14.4 % in 2023, while the Rajya Sabha hovers around 11 % (Election Commission of India, 2023). The under-representation is attributed to several factors:

- **Party Nomination Practices:** Political parties continue to preferentially field male incumbents, especially in winnable seats, thereby limiting women's electoral prospects (Gandhi, 2018) ^[8].
- **Resource Constraints:** Campaign financing is a significant barrier; women candidates often lack access to party funds and personal wealth (Mazumdar, 2019) ^[15].
- **Electoral System:** India's first-past-the-post (FPTP) system discourages parties from risking new female candidates in competitive constituencies (Singh, 2022) ^[19].

Eminent Women Leaders

India has had female Prime Ministers (Indira Gandhi) and Presidents (Pratibha Patil), yet these high-profile positions have not translated into broader systemic change. Feminist scholarship argues that elite female leadership often operates within patriarchal structures, failing to challenge institutional gender bias (Agarwal, 1994) ^[1].

Barriers and Challenges

Despite constitutional guarantees and policy reforms, women in India confront multidimensional obstacles:

1. **Gender Norms and Socialisation:** Deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes frame politics as a male domain, discouraging families from supporting women's political aspirations (Kishor, 2000) ^[12].
2. **Violence and Harassment:** Women politicians face verbal abuse, physical intimidation, and online harassment, which deter many from seeking office (UN Women, 2021) ^[21].
3. **Economic Constraints:** The cost of campaigning, combined with limited access to credit and financial networks, disproportionately affects women candidates (World Bank, 2020) ^[22].

4. **Party Politics:** Internal party democracy is often weak; nomination processes are opaque, favouring male insiders and incumbents (Choudhry, 2017) ^[4].
5. **Intersectional Exclusions:** Weaker sections, Tribal, Minorities and disabled women encounter compounded discrimination, limiting their entry into formal politics (Patel, 2021) ^[21].
6. **Institutional Lack of Support:** Limited mentorship, inadequate training, and insufficient party resources hinder women's political skill development (Gandhi, 2018) ^[8].

Collectively, these barriers impede the emergence of a robust pipeline of female leaders, sustaining the gender gap in political representation.

Recent Developments and Policy Implications

a. Nari Shakti Vandan Act

The proposed *Nari Shakti Vandan Act* (2023) seeks to reserve 33 % of seats in the Lok Sabha, State Assemblies, and the Legislative Council for women. If enacted, it would dramatically increase the numerical presence of women in Parliament. However, critics argue that without simultaneous reforms to inner-party democracy, candidate selection processes, and measures to address socio-economic disparities, the law may produce tokenistic representation rather than substantive empowerment (Rao, 2018) ^[18].

b. Digital Platforms and Political Engagement

The rise of digital media—WhatsApp groups, Twitter, and Facebook—has offered women new avenues for political outreach and mobilisation. During the 2019 ^[15] general elections, parties leveraged platforms to field women candidates and amplify women-focused agendas (UN Women, 2021) ^[21]. Nevertheless, digital exclusion remains pronounced in rural and economically disadvantaged sections.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are made from the present study:

1. **Enact and Implement Comprehensive Reservation:** The Nari Shakti Vandan Act should be accompanied by “within-quota” provisions for SC/ST, OBC, and minority women to ensure intersectional representation.
2. **Strengthen Political Party Internal Reforms:** Mandate transparent nomination processes, internal quotas, and gender-sensitivity training for party functionaries.
3. **Invest in Capacity-Building:** Scale up training programmes for women candidates, focusing on campaign management, public speaking, and coalition-building.
4. **Address Violence and Harassment:** Enact strict penalties for political violence against women; establish fast-track legal mechanisms to protect female candidates and office-bearers.
5. **Promote Economic Empowerment:** Link political leadership development with micro-finance and entrepreneurship programmes, enhancing women's financial independence.
6. **Leverage Technology:** Expand digital literacy programmes to close the gender divide in political communication.

7. **Encourage Intersectional Research:** Fund longitudinal studies examining how caste, class, religion, and disability intersect with gender to shape political participation.

Conclusion

The role of Indian women in politics is shaped by a complex interplay of constitutional provisions, historical legacies, cultural norms, and contemporary policy interventions. While the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have significantly boosted women's descriptive representation in local governance, the transition to substantive political power at state and national levels remains incomplete. Persistent barriers—ranging from patriarchal socialisation and electoral financing constraints to intersectional discrimination—continue to limit women's entry and advancement in formal politics.

It is noted that merely increasing the number of women in elected offices is insufficient; structural reforms within political parties, targeted capacity-building, and robust mechanisms to counter violence and discrimination are essential to foster transformative leadership. The proposed Women's Reservation Bill, if implemented with an intersectional lens and complementary support structures, could mark a watershed moment in India's democratic evolution. Ultimately, the empowerment of women in politics is not only a matter of justice but also a prerequisite for inclusive, responsive, and sustainable governance in the world's largest democracy.

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