

Scope for Participation of Women in Post-Independence Indian Politics

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Abstract

Since the beginning of human civilisation and the process of socialisation, citizens who identified as females have been underprivileged, undervalued, subjugated and oppressed. Women, along with men, put forth an immense amount of labour into making the State. However, their fate was to stay locked up within the boundaries of the familial walls. Even though few women of high society have been fortunate enough to exercise their political diplomacy at various ages, the majority of the women belonged to the less advantaged sections of society and thereby had no right or opportunity to exercise their political intellect in practical fields. Only with the advent of the highly politicised nationalist movement against the British did women actively participate in the field of politics and have been trying to find a niche ever since. Women's active political participation is a must as it has the potential to provide equality, equity, justice and empowerment in our prevalent societal and governmental systems that often show the tendency towards injustice and inequality in terms of rights, empowerment and so on. This paper examines how Indian women deal with political minorization, analyses statistics of women's political participation since independence and tries to navigate the nature and scope of women's equally active participation in politics and legislature as men. It also examines how political reservation in gender quotas can further their cause of equality and equity in society.

Keywords: Women, politics, equality, empowerment

Introduction

Politics is generally understood as a systematic participation process in forming general rules and regulations, governing systems at various administrative levels. The early homo sapiens surely made use of politics in creating communities, alliances and eventually powerful states. Politics must also have played an important role in the extinction of the Neanderthals in the hands of the homo sapiens as they were the ones who had the upper hand in terms of power, knowledge and skills for living in an evolving ecosystem of the earth. Power is the currency of politics. It is always the central segment of society with the most power that controls the political system. The marginalised remain mere onlookers or passive participants in the system. Since the beginning of society, women have been pushed towards societal margins while men reigned in the centre. The male members of society have always been the decision-makers and primary participants in the game of politics. Women did their duties of staying by and supporting their lords. Participation in politics on behalf of women was either despised or strongly discouraged by their family or community. The idea of a female heir was out of question for centuries. It is however still not clear whether patriarchy (solely) or the supposedly cognitive disability of women in

terms of decision-making, administration and governance prevented the men from allowing women's participation in politics. Interestingly this apathy towards women's involvement in politics has ensured the marginalisation of women in society and vice versa. The political non-participation of women throughout history has also made it easier for their male counterparts to develop a system where women are, to this day, considered to be political novices or rather politically illiterate.

Women and Pre-Independence Indian Politics

In the early Vedic Period, privileged women like Apala, Ghosha, and Lopamudra enjoyed their freedom and select societal rights. They were intelligent and fortunate enough to sit in assembly meetings and offer their services as consultants. With the passing centuries, the grasp of patriarchy became even stronger and women lost their voice. The position of women in society deteriorated and they did not have the power to advocate for their rights, let alone participate actively in the political system of the age. Even though here and there one or two female rulers had the occasional opportunity to rule a state, it must be considered that the common women remained far from savouring the fruits of these royal political engagements. In post-renaissance Indian society thinkers and social workers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, and the Phules advocated for women's education and the upliftment of their societal status. However, the point of their political participation remained undiscussed for a long time. Only with the rise of the freedom movement in India during the early 20th century did some women participate and play an active role in Indian Politics. These women played exemplary roles in arranging and conducting secret meetings, carrying party or organisational mandates and even forming and leading a female regiment in an army.

Nevertheless, these efforts on behalf of the women folks of India could not change their political fate even after decades of gaining independence from the British. Irish suffragist Margaret Cousins formed the first women's association in India titled Women's India Association in 1917. She encouraged Indian women to fight for their voting rights and even arranged for one Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay to contest in the Madras Legislative Council in 1927 (The Indian Express 2024). In 1919, Cousins drafted Indian women's demand for voting rights for the first time to the Southborough committee in London. Women above the age of 21 were granted the right to vote by the Government of India Act, 1935 given that they had formal education and property ownership. Fulfilling these criteria, in the 1937 election, 42 women were elected from various and non-reserved constituencies and later served as ministers in the provisional cabinet (Chadha 2014, 95). Women having neither political nor familial support and belonging to unprogressive social layers, however, did not have a say in Indian politics, until after Independence.

Women as Participants In Post-Independence Indian Politics

After gaining independence in 1947, the makers of the Constitution of India granted Universal Adult Franchise to all citizens of India irrespective of their gender. This was a big step in Indian politics as it secured women's right to vote and promised to offer more. Women's gendered identity, family background, socio-economic positions, caste identity, level of formal education, interest in politics and political awareness have much to do with women's participation in politics as suggested by researchers and political analysts. Over the years, though meagre in number, women have participated in active politics such as voting, contesting in elections and serving as parliamentary and assembly members. The female voter turnout over the parliamentary elections throughout decades has almost come to parity with the male voter turnout in recent years.

Table 1: Female Voter Turnout in Lok Sabha Elections in India

Lok Sabha Elections	Turnout Percentage Total	Male Turnout (Percentage)	Female Turnout (Percentage)	Difference
1st (1952)	61.20	No data	No data	No data
2nd (1957)	62.20	No data	No data	No data
3rd (1962)	55.40	63.30	46.60	16.70
4th (1967)	61.30	66.70	55.50	11.20
5th (1971)	55.30	60.09	49.10	11.80
6th (1977)	60.50	66.00	54.90	11.10
7th (1980)	56.90	62.20	51.20	11.00
8th (1984)	64.00	68.40	59.20	9.20
9th (1989)	62.00	66.10	57.30	8.80
10th (1991)	57.00	61.60	51.40	10.20
11th (1996)	58.00	62.10	53.40	8.70
12th (1998)	62.00	66.00	58.00	8.00
13th (1999)	60.00	64.00	55.70	8.30
14th (2004)	58.80	61.70	53.30	8.40
15th (2009)	58.20	60.20	55.80	4.40
16th (2014)	66.40	67.10	65.60	1.50

Source : Rai, 'Women's Participation in Electoral Politics in India: Silent Feminisation' eci.gov.in

In his article, 'Women's Participation in Electoral Politics in India', Praveen Rai mentions that recently women participated in electoral campaigns at an increased rate, 'from 13 per cent in the 1999 general elections to 22 per cent in the 2009 general elections.' Rai stated that the main reason behind this upsurge was the increased effort on behalf of the political parties who sought 'to include women in their political campaign programmes.'

Women as Decision-Makers

After the first General Assembly in India, only two out of twenty-two elected women members secured ministerial responsibilities in India's first elected union Government. Gradually the percentage of elected

women candidates went up in the next elections. However, compared to the number of male MPs in Lok Sabha, this number is almost next to nothing.

Table 2: Women in Lok Sabha (1952 - 2019):

Lok Sabha	Number of Seats in Total	Number of Elected Women	Percentage of Total Seats	Number of Female Cabinet Ministers, Deputy Ministers and Ministers of State
1st (1952)	489	22	4.40	2
2nd (1957)	494	27	5.40	1
3rd (1962)	494	34	6.70	6
4th (1967)	523	31	5.90	4
5th (1971)	521	22	4.20	4
6th (1977)	544	19	3.40	4
7th (1980)	544	28	5.10	4
8th (1984)	544	44	8.10	12
9th (1989)	529	28	5.30	2
10th (1991)	509	36	7.00	12
11th (1996)	541	40	7.40	6
12th (1998)	545	44	8.00	4
13th (1999)	543	48	8.80	11
14th (2004)	543	45	8.10	10
15th (2009)	543	59	10.90	15
16th (2014)	543	61	11.20	10
17th (2019)	542	78	14.39	11

Source: Rai, 'Women's Participation in Electoral Politics in India: Silent Feminisation'

eci.gov.in

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The number of elected women MPs and select women ministers, however, can be delusional as the ministerial portfolio is far more important than the overall number of women in office and it is often the case that very few women have been bestowed with the responsibility of cabinet ministers, deputy ministers or even ministers of the state in the most crucial ministries. Interestingly during the tenure of Indira Gandhi, the only female Prime Minister India ever produced, not a single woman held office as a cabinet minister. 14 women served as Deputy Ministers and Ministers of State during her tenure as the Prime Minister of India. In 2021, an article authored by Sarthak Agrawal and published in ThePrint dared call the Union Executive ‘an old boy’s club’ reporting that only 14 per cent of ministerial posts are occupied by women out of which only 7 per cent make up the cabinet position. It also mentioned that researchers at the Ashoka University’s Triveni Centre For Political Centre suggested that ‘women not only find it more difficult to enter exalted political circles, but also end up being siloed in certain ministries.’ Accordingly, if one is to analyse the ministerial portfolios held by women in the Union government, one would find that the number of women who have been appointed to cabinet positions in crucial ministries such as Finance, Defence, External Affairs, Home, Railway, Industry, Health and so on is very few. Women are either handed one of the less complex ministries or those related to family and social welfare. Only two women served as the President of India. Among the state assemblies and union territories, women held office as Chief Minister in only 12 states and 1 Union territory. Out of 28 states and 3 Union territories, only West Bengal has a serving women Chief Minister.

Scope and Nature of Women’s Participation in India’s Present Political Set-Up

In her book, *Women in Modern India*, Geraldine Forbes puts forward the argument that even though Gandhi brought women outside the boundaries of the household and engaged them in the national movement, he meticulously assured the male heads of the family that ‘these politically active women would not rebel against the family.’ She also argues that even though these women actively participated in the highly politicised nationalist movement, their demand for equality with men was never taken into serious consideration. Even though all women, along with men, were granted Universal Adult Franchise in 1950, very few women exercised this opportunity or rather could exercise this power in consolidating their political fate against the backdrop of a patriarchal system. Equality in terms of political participation and activism was given much thought after independence and $\frac{1}{3}$ of reservation was ensured for women and socially backward classes in the local government through the 73rd and 74th amendments of the Indian Constitution in 1992. Researcher Anuradha Chadha observes that before independence, politically active women either belonged to wealthy and progressive families or had the support of their husbands and other family members associated with Congress. She also adds that this trend has been going on even after Independence. Daughters, wives or daughters-in-law winning elections and serving as MLAs, MPs, Ministers and even Prime ministers are well-known cases of political dynasties. Almost all the national and regional parties have been upholding this tradition for decades. In an interview with “The Print”, Professor Sanjay Kumar from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies commented, ‘Parties give tickets to those candidates who they think can win elections. The probability to win, parties feel, is higher when a woman leader is from a political background. That is why, most of the women who have got elected in the past seem to be coming from a [political] dynasty.’

On the other hand, Soledad Artiz Prillaman argues that due to labour division and gender norms, men act as the representatives of the households and actively participate in politics. Women adjust their political preferences with the households. Prillaman names this policy ‘family-centred clientelism.’ where women

vote or participate in those political campaigns that would best serve the familial interest. Individual preferences especially those of women are often discouraged. This suggests that the primary decision-making power lies within the household, to be more specific, with the men of the house and women complying as passive participants.

Thus the mathematical data may show a different picture than the real one as 'Gender differences are more likely to disappear if the form of political activity is more connected to conventional politics, such as voting and becoming political party members, than when it consists of actions less connected to electoral activity, such as protesting or signing petitions' (Liu and Banaszak 2016). Acts of protest, processions or signing petitions are often related to labour movements. In India, women's engagement in the labour market has been less than 30 per cent during 2011-12 compared to 34.1 per cent in 1999-00 (Verick and Chaudhary 2014). Verick and Chaudhary suggest that for improving the labour market outcomes and ensuring women's economic empowerment, 'gender-responsive policies need to be contextually developed' by the policymakers. To achieve these goals, women, belonging to the heterogeneous strata of Indian society, must be encouraged to participate in active politics.

The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution gave the provision that $\frac{1}{3}$ of the seats in all Panchayat Councils and of the Pradhan Position must be reserved for women, SCs and STs. This provision of reservation for women in local government bodies may exert an overall positive effect. Reservation can become an effective tool in ensuring appropriate representation and delivery of public goods to marginalised and disadvantaged groups. (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2003) Women as policymakers may offer a fresh and more just perspective on social issues if the power is decentralised. Increased participation of women in parliament and legislature would ensure the improvement of governance, democracy, gender justice (Walsh 2013), less corruption (Esarey and Schwindt 2017) and social justice (Weeks 2018). According to The Global Gender Gap Index (GGCI) for 2023, women hold 61.3 per cent of the seats in Rwanda's national assembly, the highest in the globe, after using reservation quota whereas in India only 25.3 per cent parity has been achieved 'in the political empowerment sub-indicator'. Women's Reservation Bill would, in this context, advocate for gender equality, women's empowerment (THE WIRE 2023), political empowerment and subsequent economic and social empowerment.

Political Reservation and Gender Quota

In 1996, the Government of India proposed to pass a bill which would mandate the reservation of a third of seats in the lower house of the Parliament and state legislative assemblies for women. The bill was put into cold storage after several MPs vetoed it repeatedly every time it was introduced in the parliament. In 2023, the bill, also called 'The Narishakti Vandan Adhiniyam' was passed ensuring $\frac{1}{3}$ reservation of the seats in Lok Sabha and all state assemblies and the legislative assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi for women, including Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women. However, it would be implemented only after the next delimitation exercise scheduled to be held in 2026 (The Hindu 2023). There are some much-debated issues to be highlighted regarding this bill. There have been demands for sub-reservations for OBC women and Muslim women under this bill from various political and social organisations. They argued that only women with social and educational privileges would benefit from this bill without the sub-reservations mentioned earlier (Parween 2014, 101). The reservation would be provided for 15 years from the time of the bill's implementation and the seats would be rotated after each delimitation. In the upper house of the Parliament and the legislative councils, there is no provision for gender-based reservation.

Conclusion

‘It is equally false to define women’s world as one which totally suppresses female agency. To go one step further and declare that Indian women, secluded and not secluded, had no voice is the third act of silencing’ (Forbes 1996, 5). Time and again, women have proved that given the proper opportunity and assistance of education and awareness, they can constructively participate in the game of politics and have the potential to decentralise the process of political participation, policy-making and implementation. Gender-based reservation in politics is the need of the hour as the active participation of women in politics and shared political responsibility will ensure equality, equity and justice in society. The political empowerment of women would also lead to their economic and social empowerment. However, instead of considering women as a homogenous group, the nuances of the social, caste and class division must be taken into consideration so that the political interest of the marginalised, illiterate, less educated, lower caste, Dalit, underprivileged, working, homemaking and transgender women are upheld.

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