

Political Empowerment of Women: A Road to Good Governance

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Abstract

Politics has traditionally always been associated with the domination of men. With the coming up of the globalization and liberalization era, it has been understood that for any genuine democracy to function, equal participation of women in all spheres of life is of utmost importance. Political participation of women is an essential condition to achieve gender equality. This paper tries to analyze the representation of women in both the houses of Indian Parliament. It discusses the reasons for their low participation and what steps need to be taken to improve the situation. This paper also highlights how countries governed by women tend to perform better in all the social and economic platforms.

Keywords: Political empowerment, Women empowerment, political participation, representation, gender equality.

Introduction

Women, since ancient times, have always been considered inferior to men. Due to their constant subordination, women falter behind in many spheres of life, the political dimension being one of the most important ones. Studies have been done since ancient times to increase the participation of women in political activities, but hardly any concrete step has been taken till date. In recent decades, gender has emerged as a fundamental axis of Indian democracy along with other prominent factors like caste, class, region and religion. Women political empowerment has taken a centre stage in the last few years.

Women make up half of the world's population, but are underrepresented in nearly every political institution in every country around the world. This phenomenon is prevalent in almost every country of the world, be it developed or developing. In 2022, only 19 countries had women as the Head of the Government. The problem of low participation of women is of special concern for the functioning of the democracies and without changing that true democracy can never be achieved by any country. When we talk about politics, most of the literature is generally referring to the study of men and the policies formulated by male-dominated institutions. So, the basic question that arises is where are the women in politics. The percentage of women involved in politics is declining continuously even after years of independence.

The Constitution of India lays down several articles to ensure that there is no discrimination against women in any field. The Fundamental Rights (Part III of the Constitution) and Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV of the Constitution) have set up minimum standards to maximise gender equality in the country. Be it equality before law as per Article 14 or prohibition of discrimination and reservation provisions as per Article 15, the Constitution lays down a comprehensive and holistic rules and guidelines for the upliftment of women of India. Article 16 of the Indian Constitution guarantees equal opportunities in matters of public employment irrespective of gender, yet the representation of women in the legislative bodies and political participation of women at all levels of the government is almost negligible. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (1993) provided 33 percent reservation for women in the panchayats and local governments. These provisions have been positive steps towards improving political participation of women but it has been seen that women only have de jure, not de facto access to these rights. Participation of women in different political spheres at the decision making level may bring a great impact in empowering women. Women's participation in decision-making is essential for women's interests to be incorporated into governance. Since women have different needs and perspectives on social and political issues as compared to the male leadership of their party, it is important to involve women in governments to incorporate all of the societal viewpoints in policy and decision-making processes, to make the policies all the more inclusive.

Access to political power provides women with the dignity that they deserve and help them overcome the years of obstacles faced by them. Researchers over the years have continuously

focused on the need of including women in different political activities, be it voting, campaigning, contesting elections and holding office. United Nations General Assembly in 1979 came up with a comprehensive document, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (International Bill of Rights) that gave special focus on the need to include women in political life. The Second World Conference on Women held at Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi World Conference (1985) and Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing (1995) reiterated the same. The United Nations Economic and Social Council Resolution (1990) has encouraged all the stakeholders to promote a minimum 30 percent of reservation for women at all the leadership positions. The Sustainable Development Goals and the Millennium Development Goals have also collectively highlighted the need for socio-economic-political development of women. All these international commitments had a common agenda i.e., increase the participation of women in the political spheres in order to ensure the overall advancement of women.

Russian scholar, N. Shvedova in “*Obstacles to Women’s Participation in Parliament*” (2005) identifies four main obstacles faced by women while participating in politics. These obstacles are political, socio-economic, ideological, and psychological. Political barriers are faced mainly due to the lack of implementation of the right to vote and the right to stand for election even though these rights are constitutionally embedded in the legal structures of most of the nations, but are rarely implemented. It is generally believed that increasing the number of women candidates would encourage other women to cast their vote as women voters would associate themselves in a better way with the female candidates. Also, the women candidate would have a better understanding of the issues faced by women at large. Shvedova highlights five prominent features of political barriers in the work. They are as follows- the prevalence of the ‘masculine model’ of political life and of elected government bodies; lack of support from within the party such as restricted financial support for women candidates, limited access to political networks, and the more stringent standards and qualifications applied to women; lack of sustained contact and cooperation with other public organizations such as trade or labour unions and women’s groups; lack of access to well-developed education and training systems for women’s leadership in general, and for orienting young women towards political life; and the nature of the electoral system, which may or may not be favourable to women candidates depending upon the societal norms of the country. He pinpoints that women mostly play a very important role in the campaigning activities and in organizing support for their parties. But,

what is seen is that they rarely occupy decision-making positions within these structures. He further says that even though political parties possess sufficient resources for conducting election campaigns, women do not benefit from these resources as in most instances parties do not provide sufficient financial support for women candidates. Shvedova suggests that gender bias on the part of the electorate is usually presented as one of the main reasons for the political parties to resist selecting female candidates. Further, Shvedova also mentions that the candidate selection and nomination process within political parties is also biased against women and men-women differentiation often becomes the criteria in selecting candidates.

Till date whenever the topic of women empowerment arises, it is limited to societal changes. Only issues related to society and culture are discussed but no focus is given towards decision-making powers. Access to resources and a say in decision-making is something that would empower the women in real sense. Shirin M. Rai in the article *“The Politics of Access: Narratives of Women MPs in the Indian Parliament”* (2011) underlines that analysing the subject narratives is an important method to understand the various routes taken by these women to enter into parliamentary politics. Based on extensive interviews with Indian women Members of Parliament, this article mentions extensively the life stories of Indian women MPs to reveal the complex layers of negotiations that women make to be successful. In making such an analysis, the article focuses on four avenues of access for these women candidates – family networks, social and political movements, the party system and the struggle over quotas for women. The article concludes by pointing out that through narrative analysis we can understand better the importance of different strategies of political access adopted by the women candidates in specific and embedded political, social and economic contexts and develop methodological insights into the broader issues of gendered access to politics.

There have been considerable international agreements signed and conventions organised on this subject which have discussed the issues of political participation of] women and female leadership but countries have mostly failed to imbibe that model at their own individual level. Haris Jamil and Anmolam in their article *“Why Aren't We Dealing With the Lack of Women in Indian Politics?”* (2017) argue in this work that women representation at almost all levels of the government is extremely low but unfortunately there has not been any concrete action taken till date to solve the problem. They study the initiatives taken by the governments over the years for women empowerment but conclude that none of these steps were coherent with the

need of increasing the women participation in the Parliament. Carole Spary and Shirin M. Rai in their book *“Performing Representation: Women Members in the Indian Parliament”* (2018) reviews the gender disparity in the Parliament and studies how the female Members of Parliament operate in the patriarchal setup of the Parliament.

Prathiksha Lakshmikanth in her article *“Time to Demand 50% Representation for Women in Politics”* (2019) explains that since independence, no political party has attempted to bring a change in the structure of the parliamentary setup in terms of gender representation, thereby failing women aspirants. Even though women were a prominent part of the independence struggle, still they have not received the due attention.

Namrata Priyadarshini in her article *“Women Have Representation In The Indian Parliament, But Something Is Missing”* (2020) talks about the representation of women in the governments across the world, steps that these countries have taken to improve female representation and how the scenario has changed in India over the years. She further emphasizes on the need of ensuring a minimum reservation of seats in the Parliament by giving arguments that only the 33% reservation via 73rd and 74th Amendments are not sufficient.

Political Empowerment: A Tool for Good Governance

The effectiveness of political participation of women cannot be just quantified by the number of women contesting in elections. It is a multi-dimensional issue that needs apt attention. Political representation may be defined as voluntary participation in political affairs through membership, voting and taking part in the elections and activities of the political parties, legislative bodies and politically motivated movements. There are three dimensions of measuring the political participation of the women: their participation as a voter, their participation as an elected representative and their participation in the actual decision making process.

Independence of India was one of the first episodes which witnessed the participation of women in crucial movements. Political representation of women in India, though in a small number, started with the freedom movement. Mahatma Gandhi played a significant role in women emancipation and was instrumental for encouraging political consciousness in the illiterate, poor women and making them to take part in the freedom movement. Sarojini Naidu

and Indira Gandhi made history by becoming the first woman President of the Indian National Congress in 1925 and the first woman Prime Minister of the world's largest democracy respectively, but since then there has been only a gradual improvement in the number of women leaders elected to the Indian Parliament.

Surviving in politics as a women is challenging in itself. The discourse is not only about viewing the women's voter participation but also observing how many women get tickets from different political parties to contest elections and how many women actually win. In 1921, Madras became the first state to grant suffrage to women but it was based entirely on property. In 1950, under Article 326, Universal Adult Franchise was granted to all but increased voting by the women is not always a clear representation of the women empowerment as till date getting a ticket to contest is extremely difficult for them. Women voted almost equal to men in 2014 and 2019 General Elections i.e. 65.63% and 68% respectively but that did not result in higher representation of women in the Parliament. In 2014, in 16 out of 28 states women voted more than men. Along with just voting, it is important to simultaneously involve women in the decision-making process, political activism and to increase their political consciousness.

Women are still restricted within the patriarchal framework which resists their involvement in the political activities. Undoubtedly, the number of female workers in the parties have drastically increased as women tend to give an emotional and soft face the party but this does not mean that the same workers have an easy way of getting selected for contesting elections. The uglier part of the situation is that many candidates contesting elections, have charges of crime against women themselves. For instance, in 2019 Elections, BJP gave tickets to 68 such candidates and out of these 21 won the elections. Similarly, Congress fielded 46 such candidates, out of which 16 won.

Most of the politicians talk about women empowerment in all the public and private sectors, but what they fail is to empower the women in their own field. Over the years, issues around women's rights and empowerment, varying from triple talaq, female foeticide to Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, have been the regular topics of debate in political circles, however, not much effort is put in to enable them to share power with men. According to a 2019 Report by the Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR) and National Election Watch (NEW), the state of representation of women in the country's decision-making process continues to be dismal, with

only 9% women MLAs and MPs across the country in 2019. The number of women Governors is also significantly low, currently the number being just 6.

Table 1: Percentage of Women Representatives in Indian Parliament-Lok Sabha

(in percentage)

Year	Share of Women Representatives in Lok Sabha (Lower House)
1952	4.4
1971	5.1
1984	7.9
1991	7.6
1999	9.2
2004	8.7
2009	11.4
2014	11.9
2019	14.6

Source: Women Representation Data Compiled from the website of Parliament of India, 2020, <https://parliamentofindia.nic.in/>

Table 2: Percentage of Women Representatives in Indian Parliament-Rajya Sabha

(in percentage)

Year	Share of Women Representatives in Rajya Sabha (Upper House)
1952	6.9
1960	10.3
1970	5.9

1980	12
1990	10.3
2000	9
2010	10.2
2014	11.4
2020	10.2

Source: Women Representation Data Compiled from the website of Parliament of India, 2020, <https://parliamentofindia.nic.in/>

The 2011 UN General Assembly resolution on women's political participation reiterated that ;

“Women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalised from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care, and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women.” (Golder, 2017)

Globally, several international commitments have been made and agreements have been signed by several countries, for achieving gender equality and these have emphasized on enhancing women's representation in all aspects of the political sphere. International efforts like The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) upheld women's right to participate in public life, The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) called for removing barriers to equal participation, The Millennium Development Goals (2000) took into account women's representation in parliament to measure progress towards gender equality. But despite these measures, the issue has not been resolved till date.

As per the Inter-Parliamentary Union Report of 2019, India ranks quite low at the 149th position out of the 193 countries on the basis of number of women elected to the Parliament, falling behind the neighbouring countries; Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan and dropping three places since 2018. India is not just behind the developed countries like USA, UK but also behind its own South Asian neighbours. This ranking clearly portrays that even though India

might be developing economically to become a superpower, gender equality in political participation is still a goal that needs to be worked upon.

In 1987, Gail Omvedt wrote:

“The exclusion of women from political power has been more marked than their exclusion from 'productive' work or even property rights. The contemporary era is no different.”

(Economic and Political Weekly, 2019)

Election data since 1998 clearly indicates that all the arguments about the ability of the women to win are just a matter of mindset as no major difference has been observed in the success rate of women and their male counterparts. According to PRS Legislative Research, an independent research organisation based in Delhi, women candidates generally had a better strike rate than male candidates in most of the elections. In the 2019 elections, ten percent of women candidates won election against the strike rate of 6 percent for male candidates. Given women's historical underrepresentation, the study of politics almost always results in the study of men in politics. The main issue arises due to the fact that most of the leaders believe that gender does not affect politics as their underrepresentation is not a major concern. This has repeatedly been seen across the Parliament debates wherein no political party has taken a strong stand for women reservation. In fact, promise for women reservation has become a political tactic to attract voters just before the elections. Manifestoes over the years have extensively covered women related issues, but the question that needs to be asked is whether any concrete step has been taken to convert a promise into reality.

The Constitution Bill, 2008 (108th Amendment) mainly known as the Women's Reservation Bill proposed to amend the Constitution to reserve one-third seats in the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies for the women on the basis of seat rotation. This bill was passed by the Rajya Sabha in 2010 but remains pending even today as the Lok Sabha never voted for it. This bill was initially introduced by the United Front Government of H.D Gowda in 1996 but it lapsed then also. Back in history also reservation for women in political spaces was rejected by women leaders themselves.

Reservation for women in the Parliament is something that has been an issue of contention since the independence. There have been several debates regarding the reservation of seats for women in the political spaces. Firstly, reservation itself cannot bring empowerment because women are constrained by a variety of social, cultural, economic, and political factors. Secondly, the gender quota or women's reservation has yielded mixed results. According to this theory after the introduction of gender quotas women have become more independent in decision making process but still they have to face many difficulties in the course of their participation. Women still face opposition from villagers and their male counterparts within the party. Thirdly, reservations have had a good impact on women's empowerment as women have become more visible and confident and have had the opportunity to work for more women-friendly laws.

The other side of the debate has always stood against this bill and have strongly opposed the idea behind the bill. One of the prominent female member of the Indian freedom struggle, Sarojini Naidu, rejected reservation for women, citing that women are not weak, timid, meek and reservations would just increase that belief amongst the male-dominated society. She argued that the demand for granting preferential treatment through the reservations to the women is an admission on her part of her inferiority and there is no need for such a biased thing in India as the women have always been by the side of men. The current bill was rejected by the leaders claiming that it was an unfair bill as it would give preferential treatment to the women candidates and would not allow for a fair electoral competition. They believe that it would be a 'quota within a quota' for the women of the backward classes as seats have already been reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under the 95th Amendment to Article 334 of 2009 (assented in 2010). They argued that since 84 seats had been reserved for Scheduled Castes and 47 for Scheduled Tribes out of the 543 seats in proportion of their population across different states, there was no further need to reserve more seats for the women. Some other leaders made the debate extremely sexist, by demeaning the women. Mostly those who supported it, were the ones who wanted to score political points out of this bill.

But the reality is that the 33% reservation of seats for the women rural and urban local bodies has positively impacted the number of women running for the office. But, mere statistics cannot simply tell the social and economic background of the women contesting and winning the

elections. Factors like caste, religion, money power and family associations play a major role in the determining the same. In most scenarios, women are doubly disadvantaged due to caste and gender.

There have been constant concerns regarding reserving the seats for women in the Parliament. Doubts about their training and leadership qualities are still very much prevalent. Many believe that most women are given nominations due to their familial influence and at times it might be possible that women are just the proxies of the male members of her family. In 2019 elections itself, 43% of the women who contested, came from political backgrounds. According to the Economic Survey, 2018, prevailing cultural attitudes regarding gender roles, domestic responsibilities, female illiteracy, lack of confidence or finances and the threat of violence, are just some of the obstacles women face. Also, the issue arises as women leaders generally do not tend to support women candidates of other parties even if they support the cause just to support their party ideology.

The party ideologies and leadership further determine the participation of the women in the electoral process. The way in which the political parties are organised in the present day, does not give women enough opportunities to rise above certain ranks in the party. Parties have sufficient funds but they mostly do not want to spend it on women candidates. Their ability to win is always questioned, that poses a major question on their nominations. It is widely believed that women candidates aren't the first political choice of the voters. Even for those women leaders elected, most of them are hardly able to make major changes in the functioning of their party as the basic structure is within the clutches of male-domination. Women's participation as political actors might have significantly improved in last two decades but undoubtedly, their position in the power structure still remains comparatively weak.

In the first Lok Sabha Elections of 1951, there were only 22 women parliamentarians. The situation has not changed much after that. Women leaders were elected in 64 out of the 543 constituencies in the 16th General Elections in 2014 as compared to 52 in 2009. This number slightly increased to 78 in 2019 (approximately 33%), out of the 700-plus women candidates who contested the elections. The trend of not giving sufficient tickets to women candidates and a position in the Cabinet to women ministers is not something limited to any particular party. The two major Central political parties- Bhartiya Janata Party and Indian National Congress

gave less than one-sixth tickets to the women candidates, though these are the two main parties that have advocated the passing of the women's reservation bill. In 2014, BJP gave only 38 out of 428 tickets to women while Congress gave just 60 tickets. In 2014, only 7 women got Cabinet berths while that reduced drastically to 3 in 2019. The situation was almost the same during the UPA regime from 2004-2014 when maximum of 3 women leaders were made a part of the Cabinet.

Even if women win and represent their constituencies in the Parliament, they are hardly given a major role in the decision making process. In the current government, only 3 out of the 78 women parliamentarians i.e. 0.03% have been given the Cabinet positions. In the 16th Lok Sabha Session (2014-19), only 11 women MP's introduced Private Member's Bill and only a small percentage of women MP's had an attendance of over 90%.

Also, many parties do not have any incentive to give nominations to women due to a lack of co-gender voting. The data collected from Lokniti-CSDS indicates that there is no major difference in the percentage of votes to the parties that nominate more women in both urban and rural areas. The data collected from the National Election Studies suggests that areas with a major population of adivasis, SC's and ST's are likely to vote for women. Thus, most parties are likely to give tickets to female candidates from the seats reserved for backward classes only. In most of the cases, voting based on religion is more dominant as compared to voting based on gender.

United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) in its report in 2017 found that female representatives report a higher economic growth, about 1.8 percent more annually, than male legislators. The report also stated that women are more effective at building infrastructure and completing such projects within the time and budget guidelines. Women panchayat leaders due to their personal experiences are more likely to invest in priorities for women because they understand and share the same priorities.

The situation in Rajya Sabha is not that bright either. Currently, only 25 members are women in the Upper House of the Parliament. Parties and their leadership are particularly skilled at electoral math, especially the winning ones, making their data-devoid arguments on

winnability implausible. Even though, Rajya Sabha victories are foretold, given the already present parties' strengths in state legislatures. This implies that mostly the gender of the candidates contesting for Rajya Sabha seats is irrelevant to the election and the gender proportion of Rajya Sabha is entirely predicated on the parties' willingness to field women candidates. However, the strength of women in the Rajya Sabha has been dismal since 1957. The average number of female Rajya Sabha members is 9.5% while the highest reported was of 12.7%, in 2014.

But it would not be wrong to say that some political parties have taken some progressive steps to ensure gender parity while giving nominations. The Biju Janata Dal in Orissa, Trinamool Congress in West Bengal and Tamil Nationalist Party, Naam Tamilar Katchi voluntarily decided to give equal nominations for both men and women candidates in the 2019 Parliamentary Elections. The positive impact of this was clearly visible post-2019 Elections, when the maximum number of women candidates were elected from states like West Bengal. These steps are a way forward to getting more women occupy the political central stage. The number of independent candidates contesting and winning have drastically improved in last two elections. Between the First Lok Sabha Elections in 1952 and the Sixteenth Lok Sabha Elections held in 2014, women's representation has increased marginally from 4.4 percent to 11.9 percent. Women's representation in Rajya Sabha has increased partially from 6.9 percent in 1952 to 11.4 percent in 2014.

Political empowerment would lead to opening of more opportunities for women and that would help in creating a level playing field for them. Equitable distribution of power and resources is equally important to empower women in the field of politics. The impact of women leadership on governance has been seen in last few years across the countries. It was clearly evident that during the period of Covid-19 Pandemic countries with women leaders or areas with women administrators performed far better in dealing with the virus as compared to countries with male heads. Former New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Adern, became an example for her bold steps she took for saving the country from the pandemic. Similarly, in India IAS officer, Tina Dabi set up the Bhilwara Model that was effective and efficient in containing the virus. It is mostly believed that women leaders are good mentors and work for the society as a whole rather than favouring any specific section. Their compassion and ability to lead the society as a family make them a favourable choice for the voters.

Conclusion

Enough has been written and spoken about women representation in the politics. It is the time for action now. Fair representation of women in politics at all level is the need of the hour. Women have to represent in politics to challenge the power which has excluded them since decades. Women who consist of almost half of the population need to be represented significantly in decision making bodies; this will be possible only when more number of women will take keen interest in representing weaker and deprived section of society. Lacking this parity and due to this exclusion, goal of social development with equity and justice cannot be achieved and as a result representation of women in Indian politics will farther be a way ahead.

This can only come through the motto of ‘Awareness, Recognition and Demand’ of the women, by the women and for the women. Shakti, a non-partisan collective is working diligently in this field and is targeting the general elections for equal representation of women in the Parliament. Therefore, it is imperative that the government takes legislative and constitutional reforms at the earliest to ensure women’s fair access to political spheres, especially in the Lok Sabha (Lower House) and Rajya Sabha (Upper House). There is an urgent need to bring back to the table the Women’s Reservation Bill with certain amendments guaranteeing 33 percent reservation to deserving women. An intense parliamentary discussion involving all the parties and the necessary stakeholders is necessary to bring the issue to the fore and greater political commitment is the prerequisite for achieving the objective of political empowerment of women, which can be ensured only by equal political participation.

But more than the legislative action, the need of the hour is to spread awareness that would be able to change the mindset of the people. Electorate needs to boycott leaders who use deplorable statements against women candidates. Till the time the electorate does not become welcoming to the idea of selecting a woman candidate, the parties would not have any incentive of giving a ticket to one. A change needs to happen at both ends i.e., both the voters and political parties needs to accept this transition in politics.

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