



A Study on Women's Political Participation in India before and after Independence

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Abstract

An assessment of women's political participation is crucial for any discussion on gender equality. Throughout history, women have predominantly engaged in non-conventional politics, participating in independence movements, social movements, and feminist causes. However, their involvement in mainstream electoral politics has remained disproportionately low, limiting their access to political leadership roles. Various factors contribute to this inadequate participation, including patriarchal and cultural constraints, the criminalization of politics, financial challenges, the high cost of entering electoral politics, and the low social esteem associated with female political involvement.

The socio-cultural context heavily influences women's political participation. The shift from women's development to empowerment began in 1991 with economic liberalization and meritocracy, fostering women's self-reliance. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act played a pivotal role in promoting gender equality at the grassroots level. Nevertheless, there is still a need for collaborative efforts from non-governmental and feminist organizations to advocate for the political empowerment of women. Mere legal rights are insufficient; there is a demand for political parties and society to actively support the grooming and training of women, enhancing their political skills and building female social capital conducive to electoral success.



While economic liberalization opened doors for women's empowerment, both the State and political parties have fallen short in mobilizing support for women's empowerment in society. The reservation of seats in parliament can serve as an initial boost to enhance women's representation. However, dismantling social and psychological barriers to increased political participation requires collaborative efforts between the State and society.

Keywords: Political Participation, Empowerment, Liberalization, Mobilizing

Introduction:

The term 'Political Participation' encompasses various aspects beyond just the 'Right to Vote'; it also includes involvement in the decision-making process, political activism, political consciousness, and more. In India, women participate in voting, run for public offices, and engage with political parties at lower levels more actively than men. Their strongest areas of political participation lie in political activism and voting. To address gender inequality in politics, the Indian Government has introduced reservations for seats in local governments.

During India's parliamentary general elections, the voter turnout for women was 65.63%, slightly lower than the 67.09% turnout for men. India ranks 20th from the bottom in terms of the representation of women in Parliament. Women in India have held prestigious positions such as president and prime minister, as well as chief ministers of various states. Indian voters have consistently elected women to numerous state legislative assemblies and the national parliament for many decades.

The Constitution of India establishes a parliamentary system of government and guarantees its citizens rights such as the right to be elected, freedom of speech, freedom to assemble and form associations, and the right to vote. The Constitution also aims to address gender inequalities by prohibiting discrimination based on sex and class, outlawing human trafficking and forced labor, and reserving elected positions for women.

The Government of India has directed state and local governments to promote equality based on class and gender, including initiatives such as ensuring equal pay, providing free legal aid,



establishing humane working conditions and maternity relief, guaranteeing the rights to work and education, and improving the standard of living. Women played a significant role in the Indian independence movement during the early 20th century and advocated for freedom from British rule. While independence brought about gender equality through constitutional rights, historically, women's political participation has remained low.

The government has implemented various legal and administrative measures to enhance educational and employment opportunities for women. After Independence, the Government of India earnestly embraced the cause of the overall progress of women, primarily aiming to achieve the dual goals of egalitarianism and democracy. In order to fulfill the objective of women's development, along with that of the weaker sections of society, the government initiated various schemes and programs.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Inauguration international Women's Year, called women — the largest minority. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was not only the first woman member of Free India Cabinet but also president of the International Red Cross. Padma Bhushan award Durga Bai Deshmukh held the distinction of being the sole woman member of the Planning Commission. Hansa Mehta was highly esteemed as the Vice-Chancellor of Baroda University, while Madhuriben Shah distinguished herself as the chairperson of the University Grants Commission. In the realm of career diplomats, C.B. Mouthamma made a notable impact as an Ambassador to Hungary and Ghana, while Rukmini served as the Ambassador to Denmark.

The significant characteristic of the Indian social system is the widely held belief that women are considered inferior to men in all aspects, leading to the prevalent notion that they should be subjected to a subordinate position both within and outside the family. Culturally and traditionally, India is recognized as one of the most patriarchal societies, where the status of women is often overlooked, and the birth of a female child is unfortunately regarded as a misfortune.

Women of Power and Women in Power in Indian Politics:

It is remarkable that despite the low representation of women in Indian politics, certain female leaders enjoy significant political prominence. Figures like Javalalithaa, the leader of AIADMK, Mamata Banerjee, the leader of Trinamul Congress, and Mayawati, the leader of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), exemplify this phenomenon. Some of them lead influential and robust regional



political parties that have formed alliances with major national political parties, both within and outside the national government.

Indian politics has witnessed significant debates and discussions surrounding the participation and representation of women within political parties. Various mechanisms and schemes have been proposed to address the imbalance in political power-sharing by women in India.

One prominent proposal is the reservation of 33 percent of seats at various levels in political bodies, including Parliament. This initiative aims to ensure a more equitable distribution of political power and provide greater opportunities for women to participate in decision-making processes at the highest levels of government.

Recently, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), one of India's major political parties, declared its intention to implement such reservations within the party. This decision marks a significant step towards enhancing women's political participation within the BJP and could serve as a model for other political parties to follow.

Efforts to enhance women's political empowerment must extend beyond mere tokenism and quotas to address systemic barriers and promote a culture of inclusivity and equality within political parties and society at large. By fostering an environment that values and promotes women's leadership and participation, India can realize the full potential of its diverse population and strengthen its democratic institutions.

Before Independence Women Political Participation in India:

Before independence, women's political participation in India was limited, and they faced several challenges in actively engaging in political processes. However, there were notable instances of women contributing to the political landscape during the pre-independence period.

Social and cultural constraints

Traditional societal norms restricted women's involvement in public affairs. Women were expected to focus on domestic roles, and their participation in political activities was often discouraged.

Limited Voting Rights



During the colonial period, voting rights were limited, and only a small section of the population, including men, had the right to vote. The demand for universal suffrage, including women's right to vote, gained momentum during the independence movement.

Political Activism and Movement

Despite the limitations, some women actively participated in political activism and nationalist movements. Prominent women leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Kamala Nehru played crucial roles in the political sphere.

Formation of Women's Organizations

Women started forming organizations to address social issues and advocate for their rights. The All India Women's Conference (AIWC), founded in 1927, aimed at promoting women's rights and social welfare. It provided a platform for women to voice their concerns.

Role in Civil Disobedience Movement

Women actively participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-1934), led by Mahatma Gandhi, where they played roles such as leading protests, participating in marches, and facing police repression.

Partition and Refugee Rehabilitation

During the partition of India in 1947, women were actively involved in refugee rehabilitation and relief work. Many women played crucial roles in addressing the challenges faced by displaced populations.

Contribution to Constituent Assembly

After independence, women like Hansa Mehta and Dakshayani Velayudhan played significant roles as members of the Constituent Assembly that drafted the Indian Constitution.

While women's political participation before independence was not as widespread as it became post-independence, their contributions laid the foundation for increased involvement in the political arena. The struggle for independence provided a platform for women



to demonstrate their commitment to the nation and paved the way for the gradual expansion of their political roles in the years to come.

After Independence Women's Political Participation in India:

After gaining independence in 1947, women's political participation in India has undergone significant changes, reflecting a gradual but substantial evolution. The Indian Constitution, adopted in 1950, laid the foundation for gender equality, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex and ensuring equal rights. Over the years, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of women participating in the electoral process. The first General Elections in 1952 marked a pivotal moment when women were granted the right to vote, contributing to a broader representation of their interests in national politics.

In terms of parliamentary representation, women have made notable strides. India has witnessed the emergence of influential women political leaders, with figures like Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi holding prominent positions, including the Prime Ministership. Additionally, the introduction of reservations for women in local governance bodies through amendments to the Panchayati Raj Act in the 1990s has played a crucial role in enhancing women's participation at the grassroots level. This reservation policy has resulted in a significant increase in the number of women representatives in rural and local governance, fostering a more inclusive political landscape.

While progress has been evident, challenges persist. Issues such as violence against women in politics and gender bias continue to be areas of concern. Efforts are ongoing to address these challenges and create a more supportive environment for women in political spheres. Women's movements, both historical and contemporary, have played a vital role in shaping public opinion and advocating for policy changes. Furthermore, legal reforms have been introduced to address issues like dowry, domestic violence, and sexual harassment, contributing to a more equitable political environment for women.

In recent years, there has been a growing trend of young women actively participating in politics, advocating for social justice, and utilizing various platforms to raise their voices on critical issues. Indian women have also represented the country on international platforms, contributing to diplomatic and global affairs. Despite the progress made, achieving full gender equality in Indian



politics remains an ongoing objective. Encouraging greater representation, addressing persistent challenges, and fostering an environment that supports the active involvement of women in political processes continue to be crucial for the nation's democratic development.

Barriers to Women Political Participation:

The level and forms of women's participation in politics are largely shaped by cultural and societal barriers in the form of illiteracy, discrimination, and violence.

Several barriers hinder women's political participation, limiting their representation in electoral politics. These barriers often stem from societal norms, cultural expectations, and historical biases. Here are some key barriers.

Illiteracy

India has the largest illiterate population globally. According to the United Nations report in January 2014, 25.6 percent of all adults in India are illiterate. The literacy rate among Indian women is 65.46%, significantly lower than the literacy rate among men, which is reported at 82.14%. Illiteracy poses a barrier to women's understanding of the political system and issues. Problems like exploitation, such as women being excluded from voter lists, have been reported due to illiteracy, limiting women's ability to ensure their political rights are exercised.

Martial, in relation to political participation, stated, "Because literacy is connected in general with the ability to move outside the home and to stand on one's own outside of it, it is also connected to the ability of women to meet and collaborate with other women." Studies by Niraja Jayal and Nirmala Buch revealed that illiterate women are persistently mocked and devalued in panchayats (local self-governments). Nussbaum also found that literacy plays a crucial role in dignifying and empowering women in politics by providing them access to communications, such as memos and newspapers, enabling them to become better informed on political issues.

Discrimination

Even though the Constitution of India has eliminated gender inequalities among castes and genders, discrimination remains a pervasive barrier to women's political participation. Class exacerbates this discrimination. Dalit women, belonging to the lowest caste in India, face persistent discrimination when seeking public office. While the Government of India mandates the



reservation of seats for Dalits and Scheduled Castes, women endure abuse and discrimination when serving as elected officials. Dalit women encounter harassment through denial of information, being ignored or silenced in meetings, and, in some instances, facing petitions for their removal from elected positions.

Violence and Harassment

Women are sexually abused. Child marriage, domestic violence and low literacy rates have lowered Indian women's economic opportunities and contributed to sexual violence in India. 2011 study found, "24% of Indian men have committed sexual violence at some point in their lives, 20% have forced their partners to have sex with them...38% of men admitting they had physically abused their partners.

Women in Indian politics sometimes face violence and harassment as a means of dissuading them from entering or continuing in the political arena. This can range from verbal abuse to physical threats, creating a hostile environment for women in politics.

Patriarchal and Political Constraints

Societal norms and cultural traditions often uphold male dominance, relegating women to subordinate roles. These deeply ingrained beliefs can discourage women from actively participating in politics.

Criminalization of Politics

The prevalence of criminal activities in politics can deter women from entering the political arena. The associated risks and potential violence may dissuade women from pursuing political careers.

Financial Backwardness

Economic disparities and financial challenges can act as barriers to women's political participation. The high costs associated with political campaigns, including advertising and travel expenses, can be prohibitive for many women, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Social-Cultural Barriers

The political participation of women is often influenced by the socio-cultural context in which they live. In some communities, traditional gender roles and expectations limit women's involvement in public life.



Reservation of Seats

While reservation policies can be a positive step, they may also face resistance and criticism. Some argue that women should compete on an equal footing without preferential treatment, while others feel that reserved seats may not lead to genuine empowerment.

Addressing these barriers requires comprehensive efforts from both the government and civil society to challenge ingrained attitudes, provide support structures, and create an inclusive political environment that encourages and facilitates women's active participation in politics.

Women Political Participation in India 1947 to 2019:

Tracking women's political participation in India from 1947 to 2019 involves examining various aspects such as representation in parliament, state legislatures, participation in elections, and leadership roles. Here's an overview of women's political participation in India during this period.

Women's representation has gradually increased over the years. In the first Lok Sabha elected in 1952, there were only 22 women MPs out of 489 members (4.5%). By 2019, this number increased to 78 out of 545 members (14.3%). In the first Rajya Sabha elected in 1952, only 5 out of 216 members were women (2.3%). By 2019, there were 27 women out of 245 members (11%).

Many political parties have women's wings or cells aimed at promoting women's participation in politics. These wings work on various issues related to women's rights and empowerment. The Indian government has implemented reservation policies to enhance women's representation in local bodies (Panchayats and Municipalities). The Constitution (73rd and 74th Amendments) mandated reservation of seats for women in local governance bodies, leading to a significant increase in women's participation at the grassroots level.



Year	Women MPs in Lok Sabha(%)	Women MPs in Rajya Sabha(%)
1952	22 (4.5%)	5 (2.3%)
1962	37 (7.6%)	9 (4.2%)
1972	19 (3.9%)	11 (5.1%)
1982	28 (5.7%)	13 (6.0%)
1992	42 (8.6%)	25 (11.6%)
2002	49 (10.1%)	33 (15.3%)
2012	64 (13.2%)	28 (13.0%)
2019	78 (14.3%)	27 (11.0%)

Source- Statistical Report

Female Politicians in India:

Indira Gandhi

Indira Gandhi, the first and only female Prime Minister of India to date, held office from 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 until her assassination in 1984. She remains one of the most influential figures in Indian politics, known for her strong leadership and decisive actions.

Sheila Dikshit

Sheila Dikshit was the Chief Minister of Delhi from 1998 to 2013. She is a senior member of the Congress party. Dikshit has led the national party to three consecutive electoral triumphs in the capital. She became the governor of Kerala on 11 March 2014, however, she resigned from the post on 25 August 2014.

Mamata Banerjee

Mamata Banerjee is the Chief Minister of West Bengal and the founder of the All India Trinamool Congress (TMC). She has emerged as a powerful regional leader, known for her fierce advocacy for the rights of the state and her strong stance against the central government.

Jayalalitha



Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha Jayaram is also the general secretary of All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). She joined politics in 1982. In 1984, she became a Rajya Sabha MP

Mayawati

Mayawati, the leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), has served multiple terms as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. She is a prominent Dalit leader and has been influential in mobilizing support from marginalized communities

Sonia Gandhi

As the former President of the Indian National Congress, Sonia Gandhi has been a prominent figure in Indian politics. She has served as the chairperson of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and played a significant role in shaping the country's political landscape.

Sushma Swaraj

Seven times Member of Parliament and three times Member of the Legislative Assembly, Sushma Swaraj, the BJP leader, is now the Union Minister Of External Affairs of India. She is the second woman to hold this position after Indira Gandhi.

Nirmala Sitharaman

Nirmala Sitharaman is India's first full-time female Finance Minister and has been a key figure in shaping the country's economic policies. She has played a significant role in navigating India's economy through various challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Smriti Irani

Smriti Irani, currently serving as the Minister for Women and Child Development and Minister for Textiles, is known for her active role in politics and strong advocacy for women's rights. She has been instrumental in implementing various initiatives aimed at empowering women and children

These are just a few examples, and there are many other influential women leaders across various political parties and levels of government in India.

**Conclusion:**

The increase in the number of women voters is positively correlated with both the number of women contesting elections and the number of women winning elections. Essentially, as the number of women voters rises, so does the participation of women as candidates and their success in elections. This trend was particularly notable in the last two elections of 2014 and 2019, where a significant surge in women voter turnout directly influenced the presence of women candidates and their electoral victories

It is evident that a higher representation of women in Parliament can enable them to effectively address the various challenges they encounter. This increased presence can lead to the formulation of laws aimed at addressing these issues. Additionally, the enactment of the women's reservation bill could potentially revolutionize the political landscape of India, offering a powerful tool for women's empowerment. Such a measure, if implemented, has the potential to be a significant stride forward in ensuring gender equality and amplifying women's voices in the political sphere.

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