

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS

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**Abstract:** In their pursuit of political representation and a proactive role in determining their future, Indian women face both opportunities and obstacles, which will be covered in this research paper. All around, women have some level of influence or informal authority. But the twenty-first century witnessed an international boom in the advancement of women's political rights. Undoubtedly, increasing the active participation of women in politics is crucial in order to achieve economic and social empowerment. Nevertheless, several countries continue to struggle with achieving such political equality.

**Keywords:** Political Participation, Women, Empowerment, Public Life, Politics

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*Men only inherit the world,  
Women give birth to the world.  
If women can birth the world,  
women can run the world  
(far better than men).<sup>1</sup>*

### INTRODUCTION

Gender describes as the identities and roles that are constructed by society for men and women. In this context, 'gender' and 'women' are not synonymous. The social

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<sup>1</sup> Abhijit Naskar, *Vande Vasudhaivam: 100 Sonnets for our Planetary Pueblo* (Independently Published, 2023)

and cultural interpretations of these biological distinctions by society lead to hierarchical interactions and a distribution of power and rights which benefits males and disadvantages women. Political, economic, cultural, social and ideological issues collectively have an impact upon the way men and women positioned in the society. Also, it can transform this equation as well. Women undoubtedly make up a significant portion of political life. Therefore, scrutinising the role of women in politics helps to shed perspective on the many issues surrounding political involvement.

## **POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

In the realm of humans, politics is the most significant factor. It has a history that is as ancient as human advancement and learning. When males begun to create associations, each group additionally had a President or Mukhia whose decision was considered to be ultimate. Political participation may entail a lot of different things. In addition to the Right to Vote, it also has connections to political action, political awareness, and other activities. The pursuit of diverse social and political objectives is strongly connected to political participation. Participation is not exclusively focused to a certain social objective. It is fundamentally a process for establishing priorities, creating objectives, and selecting how much time and money to allocate to achieving those objectives.

India is considered as multi-party system with the six registered parties at the national level, sixty-one registered parties at state level and two independent parties. A growing need for equal rights is related to women's participation in political parties. The Indian Constitution established the parliamentary system of government and protects rights to vote, free expression, the right to assemble and form associations,

and the right to be voted.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it stipulates that women would have political reservations in all panchayat elections.<sup>3</sup>

Internationally also, the States parties are to ensure that the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all civil and political rights.<sup>4</sup> Also, States parties are obliged to eliminate both direct and indirect discrimination. For instance, when pre-existing inequities make it more difficult for women than males to take advantage of a certain opportunity or benefits. A gender-neutral law may maintain or even increase the current disparities.<sup>5</sup>

## **EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AS A POLITICAL ASPECT**

People can improve their sense of control over their own life through the multifaceted social process of empowerment. Three fundamental and non-negotiable principles: firstly, equal status amongst women and men, secondly, women's entitlement to the comprehensive development of their potentials, lastly, women's right to representing oneself and the right to determine one. There are the cornerstones of women's political empowerment. Women's participation in politics may be evaluated on three distinct aspects as: Voters, Representatives who have been elected, and Participants in the actual process of decision-making.

### **1. WOMEN: ITS PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION**

Not only males participate in politics, but women are also highly engaged in politics. Their contribution in politics has evolved over time. From ancient to contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> The Constitution of India, art.19

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, art, 243D

<sup>4</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI), 1966, art. 3

<sup>5</sup> The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights No. 16 (2005)

India, women actively participated in politics. We have evidence from ancient times that few but relative number of women had significant roles in politics. For instance, Didda known as the queen of Kashmir, Rani Laxmi bai also called as the queen of Jhansi, Razia named as the queen of Delhi Noor Jahan, Begum Hazrat Mahel known as the queen of Lucknow etc. The National Movement for Freedom was crucial in empowering women to participate in politics in India, as evidenced by Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Kasturba Gandhi, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Kamaladevi Ghattopadhyaya, Kalpana Dutt, Madame Bikaji Cama, many more which require no introduction for their dedication and undying devotion to the service of India. The involvement of women, who brought to it the uncalculatingly heroism, the endurance, and the self-sacrifice of the feminine nature. Women, in India, has elected as prime minister for very first time in 1966. In 2007, Smt. Pratibha DeviSingh Patil has become first women president of the country and Droupadi Murmu serving as president of India till date. There are some other women who came to significant in politics viz; Sonia Gandhi, Sheila Dixit, Mamta Banerjee, Sushma Swaraj, Nirmla Sitharam, Vasundhra Raje Scindia, Smriti Irani, Sumitra Mahajan (eldest, senior most and longest serving woman Member of Parliament), Meira Kumar etc.

The right of women to equal access to opportunities is an aspect in the positively impacting leadership of women in political domains. Social issues which comprise education, healthcare, maternity leave, as well as pensions have received greater attention as a consequence. Furthermore, it has been observed that women in their communities are specifically influenced by women's political involvement. The percentage of women in authoritative positions in the public and private sectors is strongly associated with factors which comprises female voter turnout, female political involvement and public service awareness to women. In India, women cast a higher number of votes than men, need for public office and join political parties at

lower levels. The two elements of women's political engagement include voting and participating in politics.

## **2. INTERNATIONAL LAW PERSPECTIVE ON PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS**

When the United Nations was established in 1945, more than 50 of the 51 countries that signed the Charter still prohibited women from voting or merely gave them limited voting rights.<sup>6</sup> Since, 1952, the apprehension over the basic rights of political participation has not diminished since the adoption of the Convention on the Political Rights of Women. Its provisions, therefore, are restated, whereby women are guaranteed the rights to vote, to hold public office and to participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.<sup>7</sup> This includes equal rights for women to represent their countries at the international level.<sup>8</sup> Balanced political participation and power-sharing between women and men in decision-making is the internationally agreed target set in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.<sup>9</sup>

According to Global Gender Gap Report 2022, India ranks 48th out of 146 in Political Empowerment (Percentage of Women in Parliament and in Ministerial Positions) dimension- a rank revealing more women's participation in India's political process than Brazil, China , South Korera, Denmark, Germany, France, etc.<sup>10</sup> Although most nations have not yet attained gender parity, gender quotas have significantly aided advancement over time. In comparison to nations without such

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<sup>6</sup> Françoise Gaspard, *Unfinished battles: political and public life*, 144 (New York, Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2007)

<sup>7</sup> The Convention on the Political Rights of Women, art.7

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, art.8

<sup>9</sup> Critical Area G, *Women, power and decision-making*, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, (United Nation, 1995)

<sup>10</sup> Global Gender Gap Report, World Economic Forum, Geneva, Switzerland, July 2022

laws, women are represented in parliaments and local government by five percent and seven percent more, accordingly, in nations with candidate quotas.<sup>11</sup>

### **3. INDIAN LAW PERSPECTIVE ON PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS**

The debate about the women representation in politics began in 1920's and continued till late 20's. The Indian national movement is where the debate for women's political reservations first emerged when Begum Shah Nawaz and Sarojini Naidu, heads of three women's organisations, presented an official statement on the position of women under the new Constitution in a letter to the British Prime Minister in 1931. The Constitution of India guarantee political equality, equal right to participate in political activity and right to vote, respectively.<sup>12</sup> It also provides for the political reservation to women in every panchayat election. It has extended this reservation to elected office as well.<sup>13</sup>

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in India raised up the question of women's reservations once more in 1974, but it took India till 1994 to completely implement quotas in local government. In 1988, the National Perspective Plan for Women advocated giving women a reservation starting at the panchayat level and continuing all the way up to the level of Parliament. Their proposals laid the way for the significant adoption of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution, which stipulated that all State governments reserve one-third of the seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions for women and one-third of the chairperson positions in urban local bodies and Panchayati Raj Institutions on every level for women.

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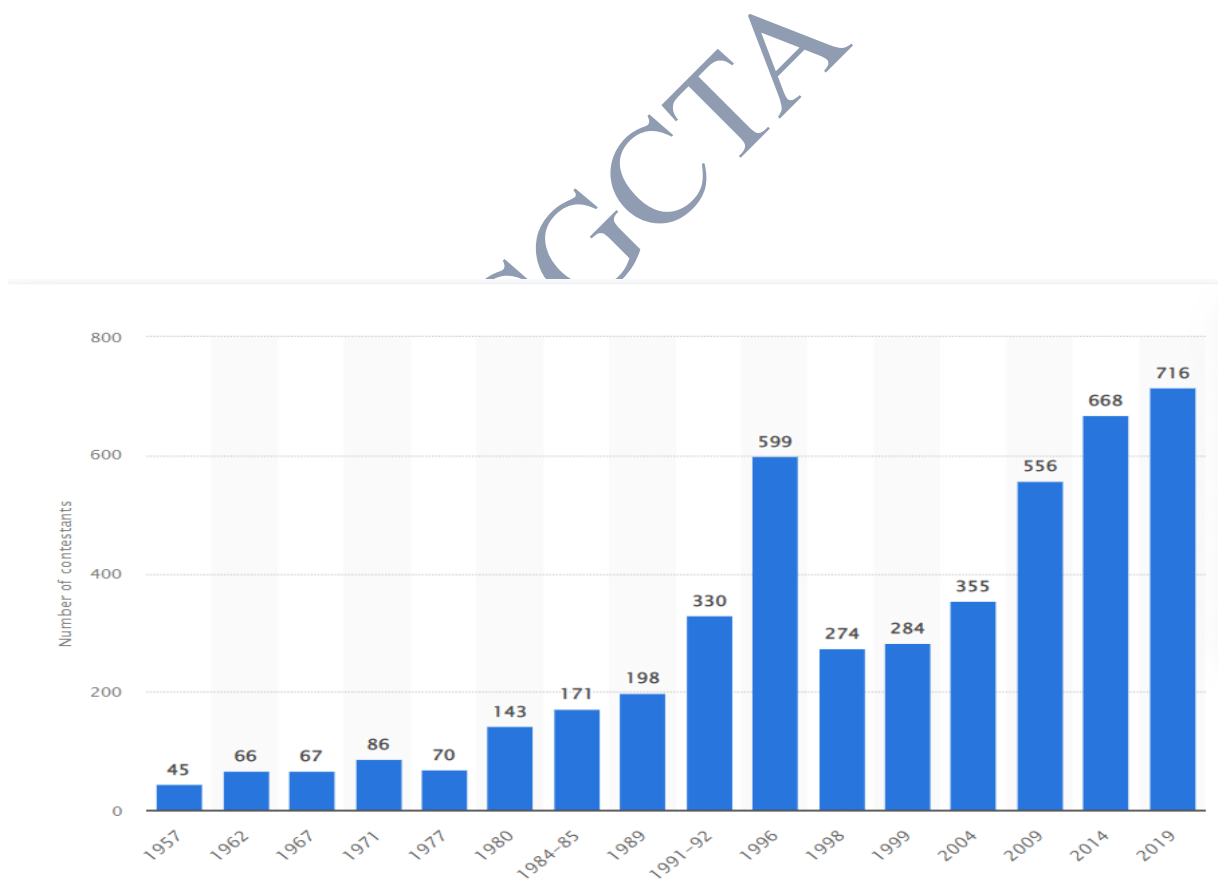
<sup>11</sup> Report No. E/CN.6/2021/3 of the Secretary-General, "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": Implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives, (United Nations, Economic and Social Council, 2021)

<sup>12</sup> The Constitution of India, art.(s) 325, 326

<sup>13</sup> *Supra* Note 3

One-third of these seats are set exclusively for women belonging Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

**Current Trends** - Indian democracy has covered a remarkable distance. Seven decades and 17 general elections after India's independence, women now participate at a higher rate as compared to men, surpassing sixty-seven percent in the general election of 2019.<sup>14</sup>



<sup>14</sup> Women's Participation In Polls Has Exceeded That Of Men: Election Commission Chief, available at: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/womens-participation-in-polls-has-exceeded-that-of-men-election-commission-chief-2625981> , (visited on May 15, 2023)

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**Table: Number of Women Participants in the Lok Sabha elections from 1957 to 2019**

### **CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS**

Approximately 73 years since the enactment of our Constitution, the solemn declaration in its Preamble to secure political justice and equality of opportunity remains only partially fulfilled. Women's status in electoral politics and governance stays far below representative levels, policymaking and governance has long been the fiefdom of men, with few women managing to get past a rigid glass ceiling to enter Parliament. Some of these challenges faced by the women in their political career are as follows:

- One barrier to women's political participation and leadership is time. Women spend up to four times as much time on unpaid care work than men in the region, precluding them from economic and political participation.<sup>15</sup> This primary reason leads less participation of women in politics.
- Family also plays a significant role in women's participation in government. It can be proved as a barrier or a support system for female elected officials. Family can aid women pursue elected positions at both the national and local government level.
- Other hindrances such as stereotyping and traditional perceptions of men and women roles in society, as well as lack of access to relevant information and resources also constrain women's possibilities or willingness to participate in politics. The women may be suppressed from seeking political office because they

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<sup>15</sup> Women do 4 times more unpaid care work than men in Asia and the Pacific, (International Labour Organisation, 2018).



will have double burden of work and the high cost of seeking and holding public office which is discriminatory attitudes and practices.

- The reason for low representation of women in parliament because they have experienced psychological violence, remarks, gestures and images of a sexist or humiliating nature, or threats and mobbing. Nearly 44 percent had received threats of death, rape, beats or abductions. Around 20 percent of women parliamentarian respondents have been slapped, pushed or struck with a projectile that could have harmed them.<sup>16</sup>
- One of the biggest barriers preventing women from participating in politics more frequently is a lack of financial means.
- Women's quotas have frequently come in criticism for a variety of causes namely the fact that they may favour political interests in lieu of guaranteeing equality or that it concentrates less on their real merits.<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Progress is still needed to increase women's political participation in India. There is a growing recognition that women in 2020 are marginalized from political and public life. Although progress has been made, there is still a long way to go. Here are some ways forward to improve women's representation in politics:

- States have adopted different forms of quota systems. These are political party quotas, legislative quotas and reserved seats. Quotas are generally binding, voluntary and increase the number of women party candidates or elected

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<sup>16</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) New Parline, Open Data Platform, 2023, available at: <https://data.ipu.org/> (visited on May 15, 2023)

<sup>17</sup> Homa Hoodfar and Mona Tajali, *Electoral Politics: Making Quotas Work for Women*, 44-55 (London, Women Living under Muslim Laws, 2011)

representatives, through setting a percentage of women. This will aid all the sections of the society particularly women to take part and to share the responsibility of governance and development at the all the levels.

- Another approach is to lay reserve seats in the parliament for women by a national policy, which guarantees a particular proportion of female representatives.<sup>18</sup>
- Mahila mandals and self-help organisations should be promoted to be organised more. These organisations, who are actively promoting the participation of women in politics while functioning successfully, ought to receive financial support from the government.
- The mainstream media could potentially be helpful in acknowledging the valuable contributions made by women in politics by avoiding any derogatory gender-based statements.
- The digital communication advancements may be introduced to capture the actual participation of women in Panchayat activities by counting their attendance and work done

The aforementioned measures are intended to eliminate a number of the roadblocks that still hinder women from having equal representation in politics. These measures by itself, nevertheless, frequently prove inadequate for ensuring equality. Also, it needs to be altered for the local context.

The women have rich history of measuring political participation till date. The status of women in political representation has seen many ups and downs since ancient times. The participation in decision-making is essential for interests to be incorporated into governance. Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take initiative to create a conducive climate in which

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

there is no gender discrimination and women have full opportunities of self-decision making and participating in political life of the country. The greatest need of the hour is change of social attitude to women. “When women move forward, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves”.

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