



# POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA: A BIRD'S VIEW

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## ABSTRACT

*Women empowerment is a new concept in India as compared to history in the rest of the world. The Vedic Yuga was marked by a considerable freedom and absence of bondages upon women. The honour of women started dwindling just after the Vedic age. The Mughal period followed the suit and women continued to be helpless and dependent on men. It was British Empire that brought a little change in the condition of women. The fact is that our society has always been primarily male dominated. Yet it is the recent time that witnessed a huge rise in enthusiasm for women empowerment. Indian women are significantly involved at the grass roots level of activism. In Independent India women have important political and administrative positions. When India became a sovereign republic, the first Lok Sabha had only 22 women though there was no dearth of suitable candidates at that time. the 17th Lok Sabha will have the highest number of women representatives ever. They have account for 14.49% of the entire strength of the Lower House, which was at 11.9% with a total 65 women MPs in the previous Lok Sabha. The Rajya Sabha brought the number of women MPs to 25 of 245, just over 10% of the house. This brings the tally of women in parliament to 104 (there are 79 women in the 17th Lok Sabha), which is a new record. We considered 30 States and Union Territories for this analysis. The total number of MLAs in each Vidhan Sabha or Legislative Assembly ranges anywhere between 30 to 398. Unsurprisingly, male MLAs form an overwhelming majority across all states, constituting anywhere between 86% to a full 100% in some states. Across India, an average of 8% MLAs are women.*

**Key Words:** Women, Empowerment, Elections, Politics, India, Status, Development, Representation

## INTRODUCTION

Empowerment of women is a basic requirement for the development of the nation as well as society. It is the most used and discussed term now a days. It is because women play a very important role in all walks of life. Empowerment of women is a necessary basic condition for comprehensive development of any society. Although women constitute approximately half of the total population, they continue to be subjugated, unequal in socio-economic and political status. It is true that women have been struggling for self-respect, rights and autonomy for a very long time. The empowerment of women is a pressing need of the day. Unfortunately, it is least understood.

Women empowerment is a new concept in India as compared to history in the rest of the world. Indian society is characterized by a traditional outlook. Women have passed through a number of fluctuating positions from the Vedic era to the modern period. The Vedic Yuga was marked by a considerable freedom and absence of bondages upon women. They enjoyed complete liberty regarding their visits to fairs, festivals and assemblies. The honour of women started dwindling just after the Vedic age. They lost their freedom and were reduced to a mere concern of security. The Mughal period followed the suit and women continued to be helpless and dependent on men. It was British Empire that brought a little change in the condition of women.

Women are no doubt the enfranchised member of the political empire yet they are far away from being considered an equal to men in political participation, political will power, especially with regard to the top-posts. They are considered to be second order citizens. Article 325 and 326 imparts women the equal political right so that they may come at par with men with respect to the participation in politics, including voting. They have not fully availed the benefit of this right. Alas! there is either an absence of particular laws or plans that could empower women in politics or lethargic attitude towards implementing them.

The fact is that our society has always been primarily male dominated. In society, women have always been considered second to men. Even in earlier periods, women were helplessly dependent on others for social and familiar activities. Generally, some efforts have been made for the development of the fair sex since the independence of the nation. Yet it is the recent time that witnessed a huge rise in enthusiasm for women empowerment. These efforts have resulted into a rise in the confidence level of women, and now they are preparing themselves for every possible challenge. The government schemes as well as the private organizations are raising their voice for rights of women. The attempts are being undertaken as to awaken the latent power of women through the movement generally known as 'Women empowerment'.

Indian women are significantly involved at the grass roots level of activism. The Chipko movement that arose in the 1970s is one example of success among the women's movement in India, as women protested the deforestation in Uttarakhand leading to the protection of the region. Since the Indian independence, women's organizations have focused on issues of violence towards women. Women's movements have focused on rape, female mortality rates, female foeticide, dowry deaths, sati, and domestic abuse. Tragedies such as the Mathura rape case in 1972, the dowry death of Tarvinder Kaur in 1979, the death of Roop Kanwar by practice of sati in 1987, the gang rape of Bhanwari Devi in 1992, and the New Delhi gang rape case in 2012, have kept the movement focused on rape and given rise to many women's organizations at the local and national level.

## **POLITICAL STATUS OF WOMEN**

Dr. Ambedkar argues that for any popular democracy, there are two pre-requisites, first, the 'representation of opinion' and second, 'representation of persons. According to him, Government is one of the important fields for the exercise of individual capacities, therefore, it is in the interest of the people that no person as such should be denied the opportunity of actively participating in the process of Government. Since independence women across social groups, religious communities and Adivasi identity have been denied the opportunity to represent themselves in the Lok Sabha

The Indian Constitution made a deliberate radical departure from the age-old poor social status of women by granting them equal, social and political status. Constitutional equal status means that every adult female, whatever be her social position or accomplishments, has now the opportunity to function as a citizen and individual partner in the task of nation building. In view of the constitutional obligations, during the post independent era, women have been recognized as a separate target group and the government have directed its efforts towards mainstreaming of women into the national developmental process. This period has witnessed far reaching changes in almost all spheres - political, economic and social. In terms of constitutional, legal and administrative measures, many commendable initiatives have been taken. Prominent among them are the constitutional provisions for gender equality and justice, enactment of new laws and amendment of existing laws to protect and promote the interests of women, setting up of women-specific administrative and economic structures, such as Women and Child Development Department at the Union and State Government levels, National Commission for Women, Women Development Corporations, orienting plan strategy to include women specific and women related programmes and launching of special schemes like Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Mahila Samridhi Yojana, Indira Mahila Yojana, etc.

In Independent India women have important political and administrative positions. For instance, Indira Gandhi guided the destiny of the country as Prime Minister for more than 15 years. Women have also served as Governors, Chief Ministers, ministers in central and state governments, presiding officers of legislative bodies, judges of high courts and secretaries to the government. Though the constitutional

equality is granted to women and women have held important positions, in practice, women are not treated well in all fields including politics.

It was believed that though very few women were actually joining politics, given time the overall change in terms of education and employment opportunities would necessarily percolate into the political sphere too and their representation would increase. However, the position of Indian women in the Parliament has always remained at a very low level never going beyond 10 per cent at any point of time.<sup>41</sup> An Inter-Parliamentary Union report in February, 1997 revealed that women hold 7.2 per cent seats in the Lok Sabha, 7.8 per cent in the Rajya Sabha. The track record of women candidates in the last Seventeen Lok Sabha elections speaks for itself<sup>32</sup>.

Women Members of Lok Sabha and their Percentage

S.No.	Year	Number	Percentage
1.	1952	22	04.41
2.	1957	27	05.40
3.	1962	34	06.76
4.	1967	31	05.93
5.	1971	22	04.22
6.	1977	19	03.49
7.	1980	28	05.15
8.	1984	44	08.09
9.	1989	27	05.22
10.	1991	39	07.04
11.	1996	39	07.18
12.	1998	43	07.92
13.	1999	49	09.02
14.	2004	44	08.16
15.	2009	59	10.87
16.	2014	65	12.15
17.	2019	79	14.49

*Sources: Election Commission of India, New Delhi from 1952 to 2019 General Elections.*

At 79 elected women MPs, the 17th Lok Sabha will have the highest number of women representatives ever. They will account for 14.49% of the entire strength of the Lower House, which was at 12.5% with a total 65 women MPs in the previous Lok Sabha. This is well below the global average of 25.10% female elected representatives in the parliaments. With 40 women MPs, BJP has sent the largest number of elected women representatives to Lok Sabha because of the sheer size of its victory. It is followed by Trinamool Congress (9), Congress (6), BJD (5) and YSRCP (4), as per data compiled by Association for Democratic Reforms, which analysed 539 out of the total 542 winning candidates.

However, it is the regional parties that boast of a higher ratio of women MPs to their total MPs in the new Lok Sabha. Women account for 41.6 per cent of BJD's total strength in Lok Sabha and 40.9 per cent of TMC's strength in the House. TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee and BJD Chief Naveen Patnaik had pledged to give tickets to 40 per cent and 30 per cent of party candidates before the elections started. Women account for 18.18 per cent of the total winning candidates for Jagan Mohan Reddy's YSR Congress Party (YSRCP). As far as the national parties are concerned, women MPs account for a mere 13.28 per cent of the total winning candidates of BJP and 11.76 per cent of that of Congress.

Women candidates also displayed a higher winnability factor or strike rate with 75.47 per cent or 40 out of 53 women fielded by BJP bagging a Lok Sabha seat. Similarly, 71.42 per cent of women candidates fielded by BJD won and 39.13 per cent of women candidates given a ticket by TMC were elected. In case of YSRCP, DMK and NCP, all women candidates fielded by them were elected as MPs. The 78 elected women MPs emerged winners out of the total 716 women candidates who fought during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, which is a success rate of 10.89 per cent. This is much higher than the success rate shown by male candidates of 6.41 per cent with 462 male candidates winning out of the total 7,207 men who fought for a Lok Sabha seat this election season. A higher success rate or winnability factor shown by women candidates is consistent with the past record. As per official data maintained from the second Lok Sabha onwards, women have always had a better winnability factor. During the 16th Lok Sabha, the winning percentage of women was at 9.13 per cent and those of men was at 6.36 per cent. In 2019 Indian general election, "Naam Tamilar Katchi" from Tamil Nadu fielded 50 per cent women candidates in the total 40 Lok Sabha seats. It was the first party in India offered equal number of seats to men and women. And in the 2021 Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly election also they followed the same 50:50 ratio by offered 117 seats to women in the total of 234 assembly constituencies

Women Members of Rajya Sabha and their Percentage

S.No.	Year	Women Represents	Percentage
1.	1952	15	06.9
2.	1954	17	07.8
3.	1956	20	08.6
4.	1958	22	09.5
5.	1960	24	10.2
6.	1962	18	07.2
7.	1964	21	08.9
8.	1966	23	09.8
9.	1968	22	09.6
10.	1970	14	05.8
11.	1972	18	07.4
12.	1974	18	07.5
13.	1976	24	10.2
14.	1978	25	10.2
15.	1980	29	12.0
16.	1982	24	10.1



17.	1984	24	10.3
18.	1986	28	11.5
19.	1988	25	10.6
20.	1990	24	10.3
21.	1992	17	07.2
22.	1994	20	08.3
23.	1996	19	07.8
24.	1998	19	07.7
25.	2000	22	09.0
26.	2002	25	10.2
27.	2004	28	11.4
28.	2006	25	10.2
29.	2008	24	09.8
30.	2010	27	10.6
31.	2012	26	10.6
32.	2014	31	12.7
33.	2016	27	11.0
34.	2018	28	11.4
35.	2020	25	10.2

*Sources: Election Commission of India, New Delhi from 1952 to 2020 Rajya Sabha Elections.*

When India became a sovereign republic, the first Lok Sabha had only 22 women though there was no dearth of suitable candidates at that time. The second Lok Sabha had 27 women (5.4 per cent). In the third Lok Sabha this was improved marginally to 34 (6.7 per cent), whereas the fourth one saw a slump with only 31 women (5.9 per cent). There was a sharp decline when Indira Gandhi was at the peak of her career and only 22 (4.29 per cent) women were elected to the fifth Lok Sabha. There was a further decline in the sixth Lok Sabha (with 3.4 per cent). There was a small increase in 1980 in the seventh Lok Sabha with their figures going up to 28 (5.1 per cent). This situation improved somewhat and the figure went up to 44 (8.11 per cent) in the eighth Lok Sabha, the highest so far. This declined in the ninth Lok Sabha to 28 (5.29 per cent). It went up a little in the tenth, eleventh, twelfth and Lok Sabha. The number of women in the fourteenth Lok Sabha has, however, declined to 45 (8.25 per cent). The political parties remain reluctant to field female candidates for election unless they are judged potential winners. In the case of Rajya Sabha also the percentage of women members has never crossed 12 per cent. Thus, the participation of women has dwindled in the country's political life. At 79 elected women MPs, the 17th Lok Sabha will have the highest number of women representatives ever. They have account for 14.49% of the entire strength of the Lower House, which was at 11.9% with a total 65 women MPs in the previous Lok Sabha. The Rajya Sabha brought the number of women MPs to 25 of 245, just over 10% of the house. This brings the tally of women in parliament to 104 (there are 79 women in the 17th Lok Sabha), which is a new record.

Electoral outcomes cannot exceed inputs, be they direct elections to the lower house or indirect elections to the upper house. With political parties fielding 8-9% female candidates in the last decade of Lok Sabha elections, the houses could not have been more female. Their often-cited excuse is a lack of winnability of women, a complete fallacy in the face of counter-evidence. In every single

Lok Sabha election since 1952, women have won at a greater rate than men, as per Election Commission statistics. The graph of the data from 1957-2019 clearly illustrates that.

**Union Territory and state wise women members in the legislative assembly and their percentage**

S.No.	State	Total MLAs	Men Members	Women Members	Women Percent
1.	Andhra Pradesh	175	161	14	08.00
2.	Arunachal Pradesh	60	56	4	06.67
3.	Assam	126	118	8	06.35
4.	Bihar	243	217	26	10.69
5.	Chhattisgarh	90	77	13	14.44
6.	Delhi	70	63	7	10.00
7.	Goa	40	38	2	05.00
8.	Gujarat	182	169	13	07.14
9.	Haryana	90	81	9	10.00
10.	Himachal Pradesh	68	64	4	05.88
11.	Jharkhand	81	71	10	12.34
12.	Karnataka	224	214	7	03.12
13.	Kerala	140	133	7	05.00
14.	Madhya Pradesh	230	213	17	07.39
15.	Maharashtra	288	264	24	08.33
16.	Manipur	60	58	2	03.33
17.	Meghalaya	60	57	3	05.00
18.	Mizoram	40	40	0	00.00
19.	Nagaland	60	60	0	00.00
20.	Odisha	147	134	13	08.84
21.	Ponchicherry	30	26	4	13.33
22.	Punjab	117	111	6	5.12
23.	Rajasthan	200	176	24	12.00
24.	Sikkim	32	29	3	09.37
25.	Tamil Nadu	225	204	21	09.33
26.	Telangana	119	113	6	05.04
27.	Tripura	60	55	5	08.33
28.	Uttar Pradesh	398	356	42	10.55
29.	Uttarakhand	70	65	5	07.14
30.	West Bengal	294	255	40	13.6
Total		4019	3678	339	8.43

Sources: Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

We considered 30 States and Union Territories for this analysis. The total number of MLAs in each Vidhan Sabha or Legislative Assembly ranges anywhere between 30 to 398. Unsurprisingly, male MLAs form an overwhelming majority across all states, constituting anywhere between 86% to a full 100% in some states. Across India, an average of 8% MLAs are women

This is extremely unfortunate that even after a lapse of 74 years of inception of the constitution Indian women are still struggling for their due representation in the political process. The above table shows that there exists great gender discrimination in the State Assemblies. At present, women representation in all state/UT assemblies is merely 8.43% on an average while it comes to 12% in Parliament in India, lowest being 3.12% in Karnataka, highest being 14.44% in Chhattisgarh. Some states like Nagaland, Mizoram have zero representation of women's participation in their assemblies. The trend indicates that there is an appallingly low representation of women in the state assemblies in India. It acts as a kind of hindrance in the way of women participation in Indian politics.

The representation of women in all the political and administrative activities is very low. We have a long way to go in improving the political status of woman as a member, voter and decision maker. The conspicuous reasons behind this plight are the low literacy rate of women, lack of confidence, poor exposure to administrative skills, low economic-socio status, traditional attitude and perception of society as well as family, excessive interference of the male, low interest in political activities, high level corruption and crimes in politics.

#### **FAILURE TO INCLUDE ENOUGH WOMEN IN POLITICS:**

India's failure with women's representation in politics isn't always appreciated internationally, perhaps because of a handful high profile women leaders commanding the headlines. Indira Gandhi was a famously hardnosed prime minister and towered over India's politics for decades until her assassination in 1984. In contemporary times, Sonia Gandhi, president of the Congress party, or Mamata Banerjee, chief minister in West Bengal, are often touted as examples of women's empowerment.

Yet as important as Sonia Gandhi and Banerjee may be as examples, each has deep ties with the political elite. Sonia Gandhi was urged into politics several years after the 1991 assassination of her husband, Rajiv Gandhi, son of Indira Gandhi, herself the daughter of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Banerjee's political rise was through activism and politicking, but she was still fortunate enough to earn several degrees at a time few women passed the secondary school exams. A rags-to-riches rise is a popular story for male politicians – Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tea-selling childhood a case in point – yet poverty is a heavy burden to escape for any women aspiring to lead.

India's poor record on women's representation is starkly revealed by the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index 2021, where it has slipped 28 places, ranking 140 among 156 countries. India is the third-worst performer in South Asia, only ahead of Pakistan and Afghanistan, behind



Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bhutan. The biggest slump is in the political empowerment sub-index, where India ranks 51, dropping from 18 last year.

The Women's Reservation Bill gives 33 per cent reservation for women seats in all levels of Indian politics. This is an attempt to increase female political participation. The bill was first introduced on 12 September 1996 by the Deve Gowda government. Successive governments tried to push for the bill but it took 14 years to get it passed in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Parliament). The bill has yet to be passed in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) and in all state legislative assemblies. The introduction of the bill was a historic attempt to alter gender demographics in the Indian polity. Proponents of the quota system argue that it is a necessary step to increase women's effective and meaningful participation in the political system. It could help to expedite a process that usually takes generations by incorporating women's voices in governance. In contrast, sceptics think that the bill would only benefit elite women. While a 33 per cent female reservation is a bold step, the Trinamool Congress, one of the ardent supporters of the bill, went a step further by reserving 40 per cent seats for women to contest in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

The failing goes beyond politics to community attitudes. A patriarchal mindset is still evident, and derogatory comments about women in politics are rife on social media, for example. An Amnesty International report published last year showed the shocking scale of abuse female politicians in India face on Twitter. Sexist remarks are regularly directed at women who contest elections, whether about their appearance, clothing or experience. Mamatha Banerjee was likewise subjected to gendered slurs during the most recent campaign. India has made strides in recent times in efforts to clean up the scourge of dirty money in politics – even if candidates facing charges remain prominent. But the corrupting influence that comes from gender inequality remains a major fight. It will take more than a tonsured head to draw attention to the challenge.

## STRATEGIES

Improving women's opportunities in the area of decision-making requires long-term strategies. They have to be systematic and they must aim at challenging prevailing structures. Concrete measures are needed to remove many obstacles that make the process of participation difficult. New strategies and mechanisms need to be developed to increase women's access to decision-making positions within different political power structures. Some of these mechanisms may be set up by the government such as quotas, while others should arise from the collective action of women. Some such strategies can be stated as follows:

- Women representatives should form into a 'critical mass' so as to act as a pressure group in the legislature. A critical mass of women in politics can bring to the agenda issues of crucial concern to women which are often otherwise neglected or relegated to second place, such as contraception,

abortion, violence against women, gender discrimination, maternity leave, child care etc., for, women legislators are more responsive than men to the needs of all persons in society.

- Devise, launch and promote public campaigns to alert public opinion to the usefulness and advantages for society as a whole of balanced participation by women and men in decision-making.
- Women should form their own political parties such as those existing in Canada, Germany, Iceland, Nigeria, the Philippines, Russia and Spain.<sup>6</sup> Women's support groups should be formed throughout the country to work as lobbying groups in conjunction with political parties. Their aims should be to increase the political participation of women at various levels of the power structure and to support women eager to take part in politics.
- Women should organise and establish networks at different levels to influence the decision-making process. There is a great need to increase solidarity among women's groups for the cause of women.
- Forming a women's shadow cabinet as was the case with the Czechia women. The Czechia Social Democratic Party has long had an internal quota of 35 percent women in all party bodies and also has a women's bureau. But when a few years ago, it became the Government, not one woman was appointed to the cabinet. The women promptly formed a shadow cabinet, to show that there were just as many women as men qualified to head departments.
- Expansion of educational opportunities for women, greater recognition of their unpaid work, wider representation in electoral politics, legislative and legal mechanisms to safeguard their rights and equal opportunities for participation in the decision-making process are some other things which would strengthen the process of empowerment.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, we could like to stress upon the fact that women should try to achieve a more balanced representation of men and women in politics and try to solve the problem of the 'democratic deficit' resulting in the low representation of women as well as in the decision-making positions. Besides demanding quotas/ one-third reservation for women in the legislative bodies, women need demand sufficient quota in ministerial positions or real seats of power. Women need to get into decision-making positions by any means possible. Without adequate decision-making power and control at all levels, the gains women have made are too easily ignored and eroded. All major economic and political decisions in India (for that matter, in the whole world) are being made without the input of women. We strongly feel that women should wield political power in decision-making positions too. A strong group of women in politics can make a difference by bringing women's perspective to all issues on the political agenda: foreign affairs, economics, trade, justice, military, peace, etc. Women should advocate for a polity based on gender parity in decision-making bodies and process.

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