

# Gender and Political Exclusion: An Analysis of Women's Marginalization in India's Democracy

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## ABSTRACT

In this research paper we examine the endemic problem of political exclusion because of gender and marginalization of women in the democratic structure of India. Although Indian society entails constitutional equalization and universal right to vote, women remain exposed to systemic obstacles towards complete political participation. The paper discusses the complexity of women marginalization by looking at the historical, socio-cultural, economic and institutional aspects that render women uninclusive in political processes. It points out the irony of the democracy in India, wherein women have done remarkably well in the grassroots sphere with the Panchayati Raj system, but are grossly under-represented in the national and state Assembly. This research brings into focus patriarchal practices, party systems, election processes and socio-economic disparities that continue to enforce gender marginalization. This research paper by combining both feminist political theory and empirical evidence highlights how the political exclusion compromises the principles of equality, justice, and participatory democracy. It finds that the democratization of political spaces needs not only the legal changes in the form of reservation policies but also the cultural one that would break the gender prejudice that is gained over centuries. To enhance democracy legitimacy and substantive gender equality in the India political arena, women leadership and inclusive governance should be encouraged.

**Key words:** Gender inequality, Political exclusion, Women empowerment, Indian democracy, Political participation.

## INTRODUCTION

India is the world's largest democracy and the principal of equality, justice and liberty where enshrined in the constitution of India. From the very beginning of the Indian republic, equality and non-discrimination based on gender seen as cornerstones of the democratic structure of the state and women in the country were promised equal rights in the politics, education and labour. The Indian constitution prescribes equality before the law in articles 14 15 and 16 and prohibits gender discrimination in relation to the law however the reality of women's representation in Indian politics indicates a gap in equality despite these liberal articles in the constitution. Traditionally Indian women played a major role in nationalized moments and contributed to the struggle for independence. The following independence women's political presence and representation declined considerably especially at higher level of governance (Niraja Gopal Jayal 2013).

There are few women's who occupied the positions are political power in Indias post-independence context other than the few leaders such as Indira Gandhi whose emergency was more of an exception than a precedent. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments 1992 required that 33% of elected representatives in local government to be women's, this led to women leaders emerging from the grassroot level. Yet, this momentum did not carry on the state assemblies and the national parliament. The conundrum with democracy in India is that in India, there are legal equality and societal inequality, which is at once a place where women are symbolically empowered as a symbol of political participation and at the same time denied any institutional and cultural means of substantial empowerment (Rai, Shirin. 2002). This mismatch between constitutional ideals and political reality in practice is the focus of this paper.

The representation of women in India's legislative assembly is still pathetic, even after decades of democratic governance and affirmative action. By the year 2024 women occupying fewer than 15% of the 100 possible seats in the Lok Sabha, and the state assembly is even worst (Ravi and Kapoor 2014). This lack of representation is indicative of how Indian politics has been structured in a patriarchal way, whereby leadership roles are typically held by Men's, and women's are systematically not only disadvantaged in nomination parties but also in regard to funding and campaigning's. Furthermore, women are also still likely to be disengaged from the public or political sphere, locked into socio-cultural examples of disenfranchisement, which will most likely deter political engagement. Political institutions, such as parties, even reinforce these gender hierarchies by failing to provide women with opportunities of equal competition and internal democracy. Thus the exclusion of women as decision makers not only weakens gender equity, but it also and limits the quality of democracy, since the distribution of voice and perspective in the government is limited.

The Research question of this study is as follows-

1. How does principal factors lead to the political marginalization of women in Indian political institution?
2. What is the implications of gender-based exclusion in relation to equality in Indian democracy?
3. What can be done in order to improve inclusion and representation of women in the Indian politics?

And the objective of this study are-

1. To examine the level and characters of political marginalisation of women in India.
2. To investigate institutional cultural and structural barriers of women in political environments.
3. To understand the implications of the exclusion of women in the functioning of democracy.

This research can contribute to gender studies and democratic theory in ways of examining how the power relations of gender shape the political context in the Indian state. It is particularly useful for policy analysts and academic, who wants the reforms to promote women leadership and political empowerment and expand the discussion of the tension between constitutional idealism and actual practice. This research emphasizes that in order to make Indian democracy actually inclusive and representative.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURES

Analysing the case of Gender and political exclusion in India can be used fully linked to the feminist political theory, which scrutinizes both the patriarchal basis of the political institutions and the social sphere. Liberal feminism insists that women should have the same equality of opportunities and legal rights as those already afforded to existing democratic systems because women's under-representation is due more to discrimination than to some intrinsic inability (Rai, Shirin. 2002). On the other hand, radical feminism approaches the idea that the state and political apparatus is a thoroughly patriarchal endeavour and therefore must change radically in its structure in order to integrate women into it. The theory of intersectionality, as writes bell hooks and Simone de Beauvoir reminds us, that the exclusion of women cannot be treated as an abstraction now, as a focus on the intersections class, cast, religion and region which together shaped access to political power.

The other philosophical framework that is applicable is the distinction between descriptive representation and substantive representation made by Pitkin (1967) which situates the difference between the mere presence of women in the political institutions and the ability of women to effectively promote gender sensitive policies. This has been a concerned especially within India because even though the majority of political offices are occupied with women's they do not have the power to make a decision. In similar fashion Niraja Gopal Jayal 2013 also presents the notes of a gender citizenship and how the right of citizenship in India has been mediated and has played a role in legitimising the social hierarchies and patriarchal norms which causes the public space and private space to be closed. The public-private gap perpetuates the secondary role in the public space for women and positions them as dependent citizens rather than independent once.

## 2.1 Indian empirical research on women political participation

Women have continued to be marginalised through their participation in Indian politics as evidenced by empirical work despite constitutional and policy measures. Buch, Nirmala (2000) provides one of the earliest detailed accounts describing the live day experiences of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions after enactment of 73rd constitutional amendment. Her findings illustrate how reservation policies improved numerical presence but there were challenges such as inadequate training male interference and proxy representation by male relatives with several female representatives. Rai, shirin (2002) also cautions that representation empowerment is nothing more than superficial unless supported by socio-economic and institutional support structures.

Empirically, also at regional level (country and state) the women representation is even lower with respect to the average of global standards. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024) ranks India not above 130th in the world in terms of its women participation ratio in national parliament. Kapoor, M. & Ravi, S. (2014) based on electoral figures established that structural factors such as gender biases in candidate selection and party finance led to obstacle the political entry of women. Political parties, it has also been said (Suman Mishra, 2022) are good gatekeepers as in many cases where preference is given to men to stand for that seats they can actually win. Institutional comparisons, one such comparison made by Suresh Kumar (2023) illustrates that India performs poorly behind Nordic countries, where quotas within institutions and sensitive political cultures have brought equal participation. Singh, S. S.; Singh, A.P. (2024) & Khan, A. (2025) further examine how religion cast and socio-economic status can interact with gender to add another dimension of victimization for some categories of women, especially Muslim women in the political apparatus.

## 2.2 Identification of Research Gap

There is a substantial number of literatures on women's political engagement and the adoption of women's political representation in democracies and various National contexts can lead to valuable insights. Much of the existing literature is limited to a descriptive analysis of the extent and frequency of women's involvement in political representation not appropriately examining the systems of exclusion in terms of substantial political engagement in the community and policy formulation. Existing literature tends to evaluate outcomes of reservation policy when exploring women's political participation, hardly questioning how institutional biases cultural barriers, and socio-economic disadvantages work together, with or without reservations, to maintain the exclusion of subjugated social groups like women. In addition, Partha Chatterjee (1993) & Niraja Gopal Jayal (2013) speak about how gendered citizenship has lasting effects on participatory democracy, but little empirical research has examined how social, political and institutional aspects of citizenship might be integrated. The goal of this research is to respond to the literary gap by assuming an analytical approach that examines structural, cultural and institutional factors to create and perpetuate women's marginalization in Indian democracy.

## 3. Historical context of women political participation in India

The historical study of women's engagement in India's political agenda has been closely connected with the Indian struggle for freedom, social reforms and the consolidation of democracy. The early phases were instilled through the reform movements of the 19th century, where mostly progressive and miscellaneous groups against forms of oppression, such as sati, child marriage and female illiteracy. There were a few reformers, Raja Rammohan Rai and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who advocated for women's liberation and this was ultimately among the early movements that led to women's involvement in politics. The Bengal Renaissance was a turning point as mentioned and women educational were exposed to Western educational and liberal reforms that promoted the awakening of Intelligence in both men and women. The rebellion of 1857 was representative of the spirit of courage and agency among women that are subsequently remembered as resistance, such as Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi. In addition, with the increasing strength of the nationalist movement in India women begin to engage in political organisation in an active manner. The official political engagement among women was relatively slow to materialize but the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885 symbolized, along with the formal inclusion of a few women representatives (Kadambini Ganguly and Swarna kumari Devi in 1989) was a symbolic official political engagement (Rakshit, S. 2024).

The Swadeshi movement also increase the involvement of women by having them mobilize in mass number in particular leaders such as any Besant and Sarojini Naidu took up the question of women and made it political linking it to the national demand of self-rule. The Home rule league created by Annie Besant (1915) galvanized thousands of women into the nationalist movement and Sarojini Naidu's leadership host the women to demand voting rights and representation before the Montagu-Chelmsford commission in 1917. Gandhi's movements especially the Non-Cooperation (1920-1922) and civil disobedience (1930-1934) movements, provided women with the best opportunity to participate directly in politics. Gandhi's appeals for the both non-violence and the moral authority of women changed the public representation of gender roles, as Gandhi's popularity attracted thousands of women to protest, picket and disobey the law. There were also revolutionary women such as Pritilata Waddar and Madam Bhikaji Cama who showed how women are not limited to non-violent and could also be the commander of a militant struggle. Thus, this period was the beginning of the transition from the passive representation of women as agents of virtue to one of national liberation (Rakshit, S. 2024).

After independence in 1947, the new constitution enshrined the principals of equality, liberty and justice, and women were guaranteed the right to vote and to participate in elections on an equal basis with men. But while this was the promise of the constitution, the political representation of women was still limited. In the first Lok Sabha of 1952, the percentage of women members was hardly 2% which depicts a stark contrast between constitutional ideal and political realities. Leaders such as Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Sucheta Kriplani and Vijay Lakshmi Pandit were few of the trailblazers of India's post independent Era but they did not reflect the masses. Studies indicate that prevailing patriarchal customs, lack of party support and biases in society were deterrents for women in the arena of formal politics (Khan, A. 2025). While women were afforded leadership roles locally after the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment, mandated a reservation in the Panchayati Raj institutions, the level of their political representation at the upper level was pathetic (Singh, S. S. & Singh, A. P. 2024). The gender gap remains an issue since India is ranked 140 out of 156 on the global gender gap index (2021). The Women Reservation Bill, which still has not seen the light of day, is reform meant to change systematic exclusion and reserve 33% of seats in parliament and state assemblies. Yet, women leaders today are still coming forth, signalling that the political space is incrementally, though unevenly being democratised. Hence, the history of women's political activism in India can be described as one shaped by both achievements and struggle- a history of women's continued presence and struggle in the system and against the status (Kapoor, M. & Ravi, S. 2014).

#### 4. Structural and institutional barriers

Gender equality and social justice are closely tied to women's political participation including voting, running for office, being elected and decision making. Women in India continue to face many structural and institutional barriers, despite constitutional guarantees and international agreements. 26.9% of Parliamentarians worldwide are women with substantial regional variations, the Nordic countries lead with nearly 44% representation and the middle East ranks lowest at 17%. While legal provisions are progressive women's political representation in India is weak. The electoral participation of female voters increased from 46.6% in 1962 to 65.8% in 2024. Likewise, the number of women candidates in elections increased from 45 in 1957 to 797 in 2024 and women in legislative seats have grown from 22 (5%) in 1951 to 74 (13.6%) in 2024. In local governance women held 44% of seats in 2022 however India ranks poorly in terms of women in political representation at 143 out of 185 countries prior to the 18th Lok Sabha election (IPU, 2023).

Such statistics draw attention to both the gains and the lack of representation, therefore the discussion should consider structural barriers to the complete inclusion of women in politics.

Structural and institutional factors have also left women politically disempowered. Foremost among the barriers is the issue of proxy representation, where bhai women elected to political office are often pulled into a patronage network of male relatives, especially in local politics (Kapoor, M. & Ravi, S. 2014). Financial need and inability to obtain resources to run the campaign will also serve as barriers to women entering politics. Women are often excluded from resources in political parties, including funding and leadership positions and the decision making processes are largely male dominated, providing a structural impediment to women and reinforcing the hierarchical rationale on which gender biases are based. Participation is also constitutionally restricted as a result of social and cultural norms, patriarchal demands, household responsibilities and an absence of family support, all combine to deter women from building a career in politics. In fact there is also violence harassment and cyber



harassment also socio political barriers to women's political participation and these forms of violence tend to be exclusively experienced by women candidates. Measures to overcome these barriers include the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments, the women's Reservation act 2023 and the capacitation of the National commission for Women. To facilitate the recruitment of women into politics by requiring political parties to provide women one third of the election tickets, training for women to lead and gender sensitive politics. Women can also be empowered through financial and technological supports as well as sensitizing society so they move beyond institutional barriers to participate fully in the governance processes. These aspirations align with the Beijing declaration (1995) and the SDG-5 principles on women's full and equal participation in the decision making that support social inclusion, democratic depending and equity development.

## 5. Case studies and data analysis

Women in India are gradually acquiring representation in the legislatures, yet they still rank relatively lower in representation to other parts of the world. In Lok Sabha today the number of the female members has increased from 22 members (5% in 1951) to 74 members (30.6% in 2024). In Rajya Sabha, seats for women members also increased from more than 13% from 1952 to 2023 (Singh, S. S. & Singh, A. P. 2024). At the level of the state assembly representations differ by the states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu often has the lowest percentage but States such as Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh have relatively positive growth specially after the implementation of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment that requires the reservation of Women in local government (IPU, 2023).

**Table 1:** Representation of women in Indian Legislatures (1951-1924)

Year	Lok Sabha (%)	Rajya Sabha (%)	State Assemblies (~%)
1951	5%	7%	2-3%
1977	8%	9%	5-6%
1991	9%	10%	10%
2004	8.5%	11%	12%
2024	13.6%	13%	14-15%

The trend indicates a steady improvement of formal political representation, which highlights gradual change. At the same time, India lags way behind some of the highest gender parties for example Rwanda (~61.3) and Nordic countries (~44) (IPU, 2023).

### 5.1 Case study 1: women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

The 73rd amendment (1993) to the Indian constitution established the framework for the Panchayati Raj system and enabled the empowerment of rural women. Approximately 44% of the seats in local bodies of governance are now occupied by women. There have been many examples of female sarpanch who excelled in making interventions to foster education, health and rural development (Buch, Nirmala. 2000). For example, Pushpa Devi implemented a new sanitation and education program in Bihar. And Kamla Devi in Rajasthan organised women into self-help groups and micro level finance initiatives.

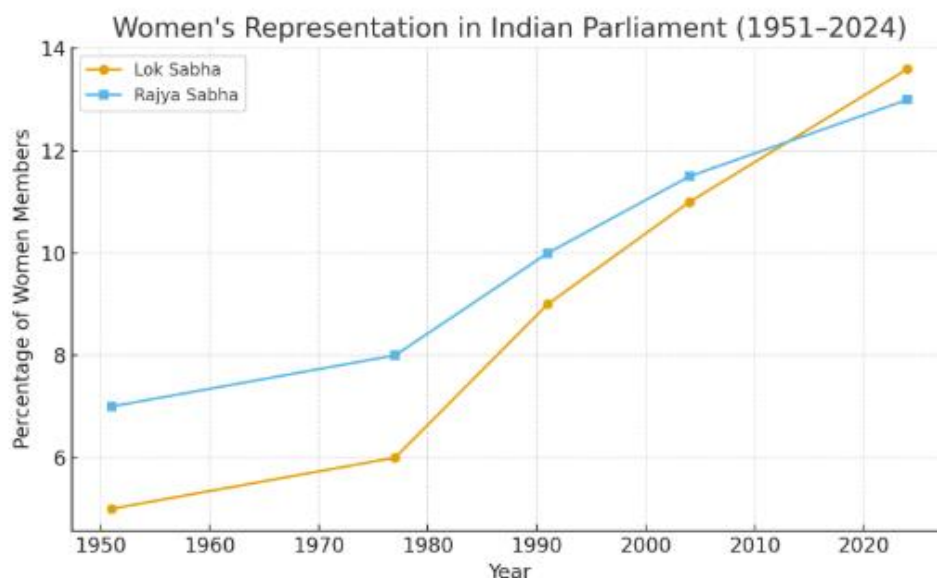
The difficulties remain, women's leadership is constrained by proxy representation, a strategy for changing the decisions made by the female sarpanch or the sarpanch Pati syndrome when the representatives are the male members of the family (Kapoor, M. & Ravi, S., 2014). While there are legal reservations it is the socio-cultural norms resource scarcity and political intimidation that most often limit the female sarpanch to a symbolic position rather than one with real decision-making authority.

## 5.2 Case study 2: women in National politics

At the national level, women have occupied individual high-level leadership positions but this has rarely translated into more representatively for women within the political processes. Indira Gandhi, Mamta Banerji and Mayawati demonstrate that women can ascend to the highest possible positions of political power including Prime Minister and chief Minister. However, in the individual prominence of these leaders overshadow the systematic gender under representation of women as a part of the political party process. Specifically on the one hand, although women occupy prominent positions of leadership within the system of parties and elected representatives of the legislature, women were just a small percentage of party leaders and included as elected representatives. Conversely, the individual's achievement of women as political leaders often excludes other women's involvement as, Suman Mishra's 2022 publication comprised an important collection of analysis (Khan, A. 2025).

This duality underscores the point that symbolic victories do not meaningfully translate into women's empowerment. As much as the individual leaders are the catalysts, structural changes including the women reservation bill (2023) and capacity building efforts are vital to transformation of representation of women from merely descriptive to substantive.

**Chart 1: Lok Sabha vs Rajya Sabha (1951-2024): Women Representation**



The statistics and examples suggest a trend: formal systems and exceptional leaders have created potential on the one hand but on the other hand, cultural norms, prevalent institutional practices and proxy mechanisms still exclude women from being engaged participants. Bridging this gap will require sustained commitment to policy initiatives, political will and societal change.

## 6. Impact of political exclusion in Indian democracy

Women in India are politically marginalized than many other demographic groups with consequences for their well-being of Indian democracy as well as inclusivity. In spite of provisions in the constitution ensuring equality and universal suffrage, women are still grossly under-represented in legislature and 13.6% of seats in the Lok Sabha as of 2024 (Election commission of India statistical report 2024). Equally, this societal situation of under representation persists the very foundation of representative democracy, because a lack of credibility in democratic deficit exists, half of the citizens do not have an effective representation in shaping public policy (Chhibber, P. 2002). The permission for women entering into political spaces was also a historic stop over point as originally in the national movement starting with the Swadeshi movement in Bengal through the Mahatma Gandhi Satyagraha movement that brought thousands of women to the streets and on to the political arena.

Even in the years of independence women were not offered much space in decision making. When the elections for the first Lok Sabha were held in 1952, the women who won seats comprised only 4.4% out of the 500 seats in the Lok Sabha (Baseline report 1998). Such systematic exclusion not only undermines diversity in policy making, but it continues to perpetuate policies and outcomes that are gender biased, particularly in the most significant sector of society (health, education and work), since women legislators tends to better represents those concerns. Moreover, it can be argued that female under representation diminishes the credibility of political institutions in the eyes of their citizens (because bureaucracy and guaranteed services and even the political system as a whole can be seen as being biased towards men and indeed it looks very strange when all the leaders and Institutions are composed solely of men). Because the lack of female participation asserts that the governing body, from bureaucracy to Institutions, is not representative or inclusive citizens, cannot place confidence in the electoral political institutions. Although factors such as the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment and the women reservation act 2023 will insure participation, the socio-cultural barriers, dislike for the patriarchy and reticence of political parties to nominate women will continue to be barriers to women in politics.

To achieve not only substantive equality but also a more democratic India it is important to bridge the gender gap so that the governance of the country can be genuinely representative, participatory, and responsive to the needs of all its citizens, irrespective of gender.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The discussion about women's political participation in India points to one paradox that exists in all along that even though equality and universal suffrage are guaranteed by the Indian constitution, political representation is highly gendered the barriers to women's presence in institutional, historical and socio-cultural avenues has been away to marginalized these women and their voice in decision making spaces. The cases of the Panchayati Raj system and national politics showed that the laws (i.e., reservation), create opportunity, yet the socio-cultural restrictions, proxy representations, and party biases equally lessen the role of women to a symbolic one. These data shows even though representation has improved 13.6% in Lok Sabha (2024) and 44% in local governance, the levels of change still lack international standard compared to other regions of the world, that is systematic disenfranchisement that counters equality, justice and participatory democracy principles.

There is a need for a multipronged policy in order to address these issues. First the successful implementation of the women's Reservation Bill at both the national and state assembly levels is necessary for meaningful representation. Political parties will need to take internal measures to ensure women have equal opportunities to be nominated funded and to lead. Women can be supported through capacity building programs, leadership training and mentoring opportunities to ensure that they have the capacity to exercise their Independence and policy priorities. Additionally, awareness raising and socio-cultural sensitization programs will be needed to dismantle patriarchal norms by reducing the domestic and social barriers to entry. Any form of violence intimidation and cyber bullying against women politicians both must be criminalised to ensure a safe political environment. Intersectional approach in policy design will address the ongoing exclusion of women of marginalised caste, religions, and economic status.

The inclusion of women in Indian politics should not be a mere formality, it is essential to democracies that are legitimate, responsive, and good. Integrative legal, institutional, and cultural reforms could help India move towards a more inclusive political space by incorporating women leadership and perspective into its government, and into the countries social, political, and national development.

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