



## **WOMEN AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN INDIA: ASSESSING THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION**

**Baijayanti Ghosh**

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science. Krishnagar Women's College. Krishnagar. Nadia,  
West Bengal. Pin-741101, India.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56815/IRJAHS/2021.5-12>

### **ABSTRACT**

The social impact of women's representation in electoral politics in India is explored in this study. The study also emphasizes how the increment in women's participation shapes governance, public policy, and gender equality. The study examines historical trends in women's political representation from independence to the 2019 general elections via the adopting the qualitative approach based on secondary data. The influence of reservation policies at local governance levels, including the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, on women's empowerment and policy outcomes is also assessed in this study. The study aligned with the perspective of feminist and political representation theories which pave the way for understanding both the progress made and the structural challenges that persist, including tokenism, gender-based violence, and underrepresentation in urban and national politics. From the findings of the study it has come to know that besides the positive impact of quotas, there are significant barriers to achieving equitable representation. The study significantly contributes to the discourse on gender and politics as it sheds light on both achievements and critical gaps in research and policy implementation.

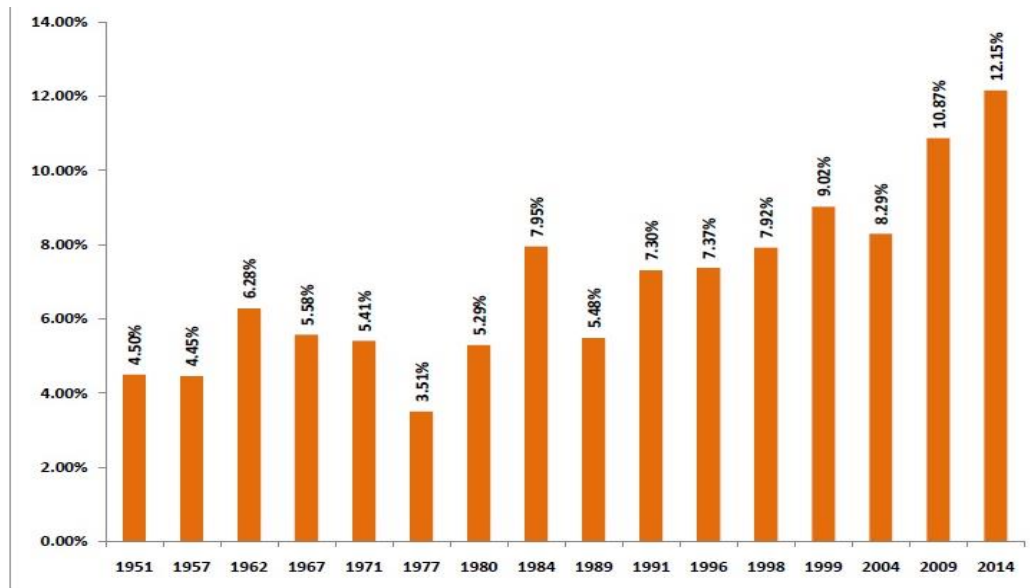
**Keywords:** *Women, Politics, Electoral Representation, Gender and Governance, Social Impact, Political Participation, India, Qualitative Research*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the scenario of Indian politics, the participation of Women has increased over the years significantly though their overall representation in elected bodies is yet low ( Rai 2011). In India, the population of women is almost half of the entire population but when the subject comes to elected bodies, it is very surprising that women make up only around 15% of the Lok Sabha and even less in many state assemblies (Chadha 2014). Indira Gandhi is a notable name in the list of India's powerful women leaders (Rai 2016). Other significant regional women leaders of India are Mamata Banerjee and Mayawati. Besides the significant role of women in Indian politics, the broader political space continues to be dominated by male leaders. Apart from Social and cultural barriers, lack of support from the party and very less access to political networks are also crucial reasons that are equally responsible for the lower rates of representation of Indian women in politics. There is a unique significance in studying the role of women in electoral politics as their presence can shape social development as well as policy-making. It has been evident that a woman leader, when holds elected positions, she emphasises health, education, and welfare schemes, and addresses issues that affect women and children. In India, gender inequality is still a significant concern, therefore a surge in female political representation



can bring long-term social change.



**Figure 1:** Percentage of women MPS in different Lok Sabhas till 2014 (Source: Muthyanolla 2019)

### 1.1 Aim and objectives of the study

Assessing the social impact of the representation of Indian women in electoral politics is the aim of this study.

### 1.2 Objectives of the study:

- To assess how women leaders influence policy and governance.
- To cross-check the effect of the participation of women in Indian politics on social development.
- To evaluate the effects of women leadership representation on aspects like education, healthcare, and welfare.
- To mark barriers experienced by women in entering and sustaining political roles.
- To assess the importance of the presence of women in politics changes community perceptions and gender roles.

The scope of the article is bound by a qualitative analysis approach on the basis of secondary sources. In this study, case studies, research reports, government data, and media coverage are considered as the secondary source of data. Examples from local, state, and national levels are emphasised in this study which helps to understand how female political participation led to social development and challenges existing gender norms.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Historical and Current Trends

Since independence, in Indian electoral politics, Women's representation has evolved gradually. As mentioned in a report by al-Shammari (2018) the first general elections in 1951-1952 is definitely an achievement for women in the Indian Parliament. Although only 22 women are elected as Members of Parliament out of 489. It set the stage for women's political participation at the national level. Over the next few decades, the representation of women in electoral politics has remained uniform. Approximately 3.8%



and 5% of women were getting a position in electoral politics, even at the time of Indira Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister (Rai 2012). The year 1984 saw a sudden surge in women's representation as in this year the percentage rose to 7%. It happened entirely due to political shifts adhering to Gandhi's assassination. In the year of 2009, women's representation went beyond 10%, and by 2019, 78 women were elected to the Lok Sabha (Ravindran 2020). Therefore, within ten years, the percentage of women's representation in the political scenario touches the graph of 14.36%. However, the count of Indian women represented in the political field is still far from the global average of 26.5%. As mentioned by the government press information bureau in the Rajya Sabha, the presence of women is 15 (6.94%) in 1952 increased to 31 (12.76%) in 2014 and is 26(10.83%) in 2019. which sheds light on the modest progress of women in India's political landscape.

## **2.2 Impact of Women's Quotas and Reservation Policies**

In history, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments enacted in 1993 is marked as a significant turning point for uplifting women's position in Indian political field. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments bring 33% reservation for women in Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, Zilla Parishads, Municipalities, and Municipal Corporations as well as for the posts of Sarpanch, Chairman and Mayor (Hoque 2020). With this policy, a significant count of females got candidacy in reserved constituencies as well as it opened doors for women from diverse and marginalized backgrounds to be part of India's political scenario. The positive outcomes of these reservations have been documented in a lot of studies. In Women-led panchayats, a significant improvement is seen in governance, along with a better allocation of resources to healthcare, education, as well as sanitation. It is noted in a study by Duflo (2012) that in constituencies led by women 12% a notable increment is seen in girls' school enrollment and higher investment is seen in drinking water facilities. In addition to this, in areas with female representatives gender-based violence cases were also addressed efficiently which marks the importance of women's participation in India's political scenario. Although it is very tough to attempt to extend similar quotas to the national level. The Women's Reservation Bill (108th Amendment) proposes the reservation of 33% of seats in Parliament and state assemblies, but it has experienced repeated delays since its introduction in 1996 (Nugent 2011). In the year 2020, around 20 states had adopted voluntary quotas within political parties, but there is still an inconsistency noticed in its enforcement and compliance.

## **2.3 Theoretical Frameworks: Feminism and Political Representation**

Multiple feminist theories and the concept of political representation have laid the foundation for women's electoral participation in India. Feminist political theory sheds light on the fact that representation of women should be embraced in the political field as it is necessary to ensure inclusive and equitable governance (Allen 2020). Popular theorist Anne Phillips' thoughts descriptive representation is very important to achieve substantive representation (Espírito-Santo et al. 2020). The actual meaning of it is having more women in political roles is necessary for understanding the needs and interests of women are actively addressed through policy and governance. In India, there is a separate importance of Anne Phillips's perspective as it highlights how gendered power structures and patriarchal norms are obstacles to women's access to political roles. Besides Feminist political theory, Political representation theory also defines the symbolic impact of women leaders in inspiring societal shifts and challenging traditional gender roles.

## **2.4 Gaps in Current Research**

There is available data on the benefits of reservations and rising female participation, but there are still some areas that need further exploration. In this context, the lack of long-term studies tracking the career progression of women leaders beyond local governance is one of the notable gaps in research. Limited qualitative research on the exploration of the experiences of women in urban electoral politics, where representation continues to lag despite higher literacy



and awareness levels is also an area that needs to be bridged. In addition to this, the issue of tokenism also needs further exploration as tokenism women are marked as "proxy candidates" under the control of male family members. As per reports maximum time, women candidates were the victims of intimidation or harassment at the time of campaigns, therefore this area needs in-depth analyses on the psychological or structural impacts of such challenges.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research methodology is adopted in this study. The study completely stands on the base of secondary data. The study explores and assesses the social impact of women's representation in electoral politics in India with the help of collecting secondary information from studies, reports, and newspaper articles. Qualitative secondary research is prominent for this study because it aids in the in-depth analysis of political trends, historical developments, and policy outcomes, as well as lived experiences already documented by scholars, government bodies, and media sources (Patel and Patel 2019). In this research, a wide range of credible and relevant secondary sources such as academic journal articles, government publications, policy documents, official electoral records, and reports from non-governmental organizations are considered to lay the foundation of the study. The study followed a thematic analysis approach which is prominent for identifying recurring patterns, outcomes, as well as challenges across different levels of governance—local, state, and national without the involvement of human participants or primary fieldwork. The use of secondary qualitative data makes sure that the article not only remains focused, but also contextual, and well-supported by documented evidence (Greening 2019). As this study does not involve human participants or personal data, so there are no initial ethical concerns related to the collection of data.

### 4. FINDINGS

The representation of women in Indian electoral politics has offered a measurable amount of social impact. Though there are various systemic barriers that still persist. Women constitute nearly half the population. But they very less number was elected to the 18th Lok Sabha This specific fact highlights that there is a significant gap in the representation of women in electoral politics. Both progress and challenges are revealed by recent developments and research.

#### 4.1 Real-World Examples from Constituencies Led by Women

The role of women in the local Indian government has brought real change. Smt. Mamta Devi is a leader from the SC community of Himachal Pradesh. She has led her panchayat, "Soukni-da-Kot," for two (Badola et al. 2017). She has also improved the conditions of roads, schools as well as medical clinics with the support of various NGOs like CORD. On the other hand, women-led local councils in Bihar and Kerala have kept the focus on providing clean water, sanitation as well as maternal health (Vidya 2018). These specific facts highlight a clear shift in priorities when the governments are led by women.

The political participation of women in India has gained significant improvement. Over 44% representation is noted in Panchayati Raj Institutions (GHOSH and KUMAR 2014). This is because of the constitutional quotas. But the women at the national and state levels hold only 13.6% of the seats in the Lok Sabha and approximately 9% in the state assemblies (Ramaswamy 2005).

**Table 1:** Women's Political Representation and Participation in India

Aspect	Statistics
Women's representation in Lok Sabha	13.6% of seats held by women



Women's representation in Rajya Sabha	16.8% of seats held by women
Women's representation in State Assemblies	Average 9%, no state above 20% of women legislators
Women's representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions	Over 44% of elected seats held by women
Women voter turnout	Women's turnout often equals or exceeds men's
Number of women candidates in Lok Sabha elections	799 women candidates in 2024 (9.5% of total)
States with highest women MPs	West Bengal leads with 11 women MPs
Global average women in parliament	Around 25%

#### 4.2 Social Outcomes: Education, Healthcare, and Awareness

The women representatives in PRIs or the Panchayati Raj Institutions have highlighted a strong result in the development of society (Menon 2007). PRIs have increased the number of school enrolments for girls. This is especially evident in the establishments of various schemes like midday meals. On the other hand, panchayats that are led by women made sure that maternal care is better and well-covered in terms of vaccination. There are also some networks including JEEVIKA in Bihar, that have worked at the grassroots level (Sanyal et al. 2015). This specific network has significantly helped in making the connection strong between the women leaders. This is how JEEVIKA has helped the women leaders raise their voices against different types of odds in the society. The participation of female voters in India has also seen a huge growth. It grew by 27% in the year of 2019. On the other hand, the male turnout increased by only 7% (Hessami and da Fonseca 2020). This specific percentage clearly highlights the fact that awareness about politics is rapidly increasing among women.

#### 4.3 Voter Perception and Societal Changes

The preferences of voters are also rapidly shifting. There are many such women voters who have supported female candidates who kept their focus on increasing the safety and protection from every type of violence that happens against women. On the other hand, the preferences of male voters are often noted to be heavy for the candidates who promise the enhancement of public infrastructure. Communities that face higher levels of discrimination regarding their caste generally noted to support for women leaders. This is because these leaders were seen as more empathetic and responsive (Cundiff and Komarraju 2008). Research has found that some independent women candidates in India sometimes offered better results than those belonging to any political party (Kapoor and Magesan 2018). This specific fact clearly suggests that party structures may not always favour the campaigns that are women-friendly.

#### 4.4 Barriers and Enablers to Impactful Representation

Several obstacles still remain despite the huge participation of women in Electoral Politics. There are various types of patriarchal norms that exist within the political parties that make it very hard for women to get nominations. There is still a huge dominance of money and influence on the elections in India. This specific fact creates disadvantages for women to join electoral politics. The Women's Reservation Bill (33% quota in Lok Sabha) passed the Rajya Sabha in the year of 2023. But still, it remains stuck in the Lok Sabha since 2008. On the other hand, the reservations in the PRIs have not significantly contributed to creating improvements at the state and national levels. But there are various grassroots leadership training programs organised by NGOs and voluntary quotas by different parties, including BJD and JMM, that are still helping (Rodrigues 2014). On the other hand, campaigns that are focused on the safety of women also have more support. This is especially evident in areas that are prone to conflicts.



**Table 2:** Women in Indian Politics: Barriers vs Enablers

Category	Barriers	Enablers
Society	Patriarchy, gender stereotypes	Growing gender awareness
Violence	Harassment, intimidation	Legal protections (limited)
Economy	High election costs	Financial aid, NGO support
Education	Low literacy, political awareness	Leadership training programs
Political Parties	Male dominance, limited tickets	Party quotas, women's wings
Legal	Delay in Women's Reservation Bill	PRI reservations (33–50%)
Electoral System	Money power, first-past-the-post system	Rising women voter turnout

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results showed that a greater percentage of women's bench strength in Indian electoral politics, which is focused especially at the local level, positively accounts for actual social and policy outcomes. Women who have been elected to head Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have played a crucial role in maintaining governance priorities as part of public welfare, and there are significant improvements in sectors like education, health, sanitation, and security. These findings are evidence that women leaders can better tackle gender-specific concerns and community-specific priorities positively.

One of the key takeaways is that reservation policies like the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments not only enhanced women's participation in political processes but also increased participation from marginalised groups like Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Hust 2002). Reservation of seats for women, and especially the combination of reservation of seats by gender and caste, have made governance much more inclusive and broadened the democratic base. There is evidence that female politicians in reserved constituencies were linked to a notable increase in school enrollment of girls, irrefutable evidence for gender responsive governance (Sperling and Winthrop 2015).

Yet the research also reveals systematic barriers to the full exercise of female political engagement. These consist of tokenism in the form of women representing male relatives' restrictions on autonomy through patriarchal party organization and exposure to violence and intimidation at elections. Moreover, the stalled progress of the Women's Reservation Bill within Parliament continues to constrain the institutionalization of gender quotas at higher levels of politics (Dahlerup 2005).

Clearly, voting patterns are beginning to reflect this changing perception. Voters are signalling support for women candidates, particularly from marginalized caste groups and independent women candidates, suggesting that the public is feeling more trust in women's leadership. This is also supported by female voter turnout increasing by 27% from 2009 to 2019, while male voter turnout increased by just 7% (Ravindran 2020).

These dynamics highlight the importance of stronger institutional intervention, including training for women leaders, implementation of stricter voluntary party quotas, and the passing of the Women's Reservation Bill that has been pending for years. If addressed, these recommendations could effectively scale up the beneficial local impacts observed in PRI's to the national political sphere. Although there are still barriers, the social impact of women in



Indian electoral politics is demonstrable and gaining momentum. There are opportunities to harness this momentum with strategic interventions and legislative reforms so that we may build something that leads to sustained structural change.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The participation of women in Indian politics has gained notable improvement. This is especially evident at the local level. A notable amount of seats in Panchayati Raj are noted to be held by women. But, the presence of women in state and national legislatures is still noted to be very low. The women leaders in Indian politics have contributed to significant positive impacts in various social areas, including education, healthcare, and sanitation. There are also some barriers to the rising engagement of women voters. Some of these barriers include patriarchy, violence as well as biases within parties.

The representation of women in politics may be improved with the help of the expansion of various quotas to state and national levels. On the other hand, representatives may also work on making civic education more accessible and provide proper training on leadership and financial support to the female candidates. On the other hand, it is also important to have stronger enforcement of party-level quotas. Future research needs to effectively explore the long-term effects of the leadership led by women. It is also crucial to analyse how different types of intersectional identities, including caste and class, affect political outcomes. The approach of gaining a proper understanding of these specific areas may significantly help in building an inclusive and representative democracy in India.

## REFERENCES

- Allen, I.K., 2020. Thinking with a Feminist Political Ecology of Air-and-breathing-bodies. *Body & Society*, 26(2), pp.79-105.
- al-Shammari, N.A.S. and Dali, A.M., 2018. THE INDIAN ELECTION OF 1951: FIRST TEST AS A NEW INDEPENDENT DEMOCRATIC STATE. *SEJARAH: Journal of the Department of History*, 27(1 (June)).
- Badola, E., Rawal, R.S. and Dhyani, P., 2017. Stories of Success: Narratives from a sacred land. GB Pant National Institute of Himalayan Environment & Sustainable Development, Almora, Uttarakhand (India) Page, 3, p.4.
- Burchi, F. and Singh, K. (2020) *Journal of South Asian Development*, 15(1), pp. 7–33. doi: 10.1177/0973174120913722.
- Chadha, A., 2014. Political participation of women: A case study in India. *OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development*, 7(02), pp.91-108.
- Cundiff, N.L. and Komaraju, M., 2008. Gender differences in ethnocultural empathy and attitudes toward men and women in authority. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 15(1), pp.5-15.
- Dahlerup, D., 2005. Increasing women's political representation: New trends in gender quotas. *Women in parliament: Beyond numbers*, 141.
- Duflo, E., 2012. Women empowerment and economic development. *Journal of Economic literature*, 50(4), pp.1051-1079.
- Espírito-Santo, A., Freire, A. and Serra-Silva, S., 2020. Does women's descriptive representation matter for policy preferences? The role of political parties. *Party Politics*, 26(2), pp.227-237.
- GHOSH, G. and KUMAR, U., 2014. Participation of women in Panchayat Raj institution: a block level study of West Bengal. *Journal of AgriSearch*, 1(3).
- Greening, N., 2019. Phenomenological research methodology. *Scientific Research Journal*, 7(5), pp.88-92.
- Hessami, Z. and da Fonseca, M.L., 2020. Female political representation and substantive effects on policies: A literature review. *European Journal of Political Economy*, 63, p.101896.
- Hoque, A., 2020. Political empowerment of women through Panchayati Raj institutions in India. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Engineering and Technology*, 11(10), pp.1827-1840.



- Hust, E., 2002. Political representation and empowerment: Women in the institutions of local government in Orissa after the 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution. Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics, (6).
- Kapoor, S. and Magesan, A., 2018. Independent candidates and political representation in India. American Political Science Review, 112(3), pp.678-697.
- Menon, S.V., 2007. Grass root democracy and empowerment of people: evaluation of Panchayati Raj in India.
- Muthyanolla, S.K. et al. (2019) Women mps in Lok Sabha: How have the numbers changed?, FACTLY. Available at: <https://factly.in/women-mps-in-lok-sabha-how-have-the-numbers-changed/>
- Nugent, A., 2011. Panchayats, Seat Reservations and the Women's Question in India: A Historical Trajectory (Doctoral dissertation).
- Patel, M. and Patel, N., 2019. Exploring research methodology. International Journal of Research and Review, 6(3), pp.48-55.
- Rai, P., 2011. Electoral participation of women in India: Key determinants and barriers. Economic and political weekly, pp.47-55.
- Rai, R., 2016. Women in the lives of the national leaders of India:(a study on Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru) (Doctoral dissertation, University of North Bengal).
- Rai, S.M., 2012. The politics of access: Narratives of women MPs in the Indian parliament. Political Studies, 60(1), pp.195-212.
- Ramaswamy, S., 2005. India's crisis of governance: The women's perspective. Policy and Society, 24(3), pp.122-141.
- Ravindran, D., 2020. Enrolment of women in higher education: A comparative study on women's equity in governance and employment status in India. Journal of International Women's Studies, 21(5), pp.65-78.
- Rodrigues, V., 2014. Elections and Civil Society in India.
- Sanyal, P., Rao, V. and Majumdar, S., 2015. Recasting culture to undo gender: A sociological analysis of Jeevika in Rural Bihar, India.
- Sperling, G.B. and Winthrop, R., 2015. What works in girls' education: Evidence for the world's best investment. Brookings Institution Press.
- Vidya, S., 2018. Empowerment of women through participation in panchayat raj institutions: the case of Kerala (Doctoral dissertation, Department of Economics, University of Calicut, Kerala.).