

Women's Political Participation in India:

Historical Evolution, Institutional Reforms, and Contemporary Challenges

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Abstract— Women's political participation is a core indicator of democratic inclusiveness and gender equality. In India, the evolution of women's political rights has been shaped by a unique historical trajectory that intertwines anti-colonial struggle, social reform movements, constitutional guarantees, and institutional innovations. This paper examines the historical evolution of women's suffrage in India, the development of women's political participation after independence, key global and national milestones in women's political history, and the role of parliamentary debates and committees in shaping women-centric legislation, particularly the Women's Reservation Bill. Drawing on historical analysis and institutional perspectives, the study highlights how women's political empowerment in India has progressed from limited representation to constitutional recognition and recent legislative breakthroughs. However, despite significant gains, persistent structural, cultural, and institutional barriers continue to limit substantive political equality. The paper argues that while India has achieved formal gender parity in political rights, the challenge lies in transforming numerical representation into meaningful participation and leadership.

Index Terms— Women's political participation, suffrage, constitutional reforms, reservation, Indian democracy

I. INTRODUCTION

Political participation of women is fundamental to the functioning of a democratic society. It ensures inclusiveness, diversity in decision-making, and equitable representation of social interests. In India, women's political participation has evolved through a long and complex process shaped by colonial rule, nationalist movements, constitutional provisions, and post-independence institutional reforms. Unlike Western democracies where suffrage movements largely focused on voting rights, the Indian women's movement was deeply embedded in broader struggles for social reform and national liberation [1].

This paper seeks to analyze the historical and institutional dimensions of women's political participation in India. It traces the origins of the women's suffrage movement, examines post-independence political participation, situates India's experience within global milestones of women's political history, and critically evaluates parliamentary debates and legislative initiatives related to women's representation. The central argument is that although India has made remarkable progress in ensuring formal political equality, substantive empowerment remains uneven and incomplete.

II. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN INDIA

The women's suffrage movement in India emerged in the late nineteenth century as part of wider social reform and nationalist movements. Early reformers recognized that women's education and participation were essential for social progress. Pioneers such as Pandita Ramabai challenged orthodox practices and emphasized women's education, laying the intellectual groundwork for later political mobilization. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar further contributed to an environment supportive of women's rights.

Organized political articulation of women's demands gained momentum in the early twentieth century with the formation of women's organizations. The establishment of the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1927 marked a turning point, as it provided a national platform for advocating women's political rights. Initially focused on education, the AIWC soon expanded its agenda to include suffrage, legal reforms, and representation in legislative bodies. Under leaders such as Margaret Cousins, the organization unified women across regions and social backgrounds [2].

Colonial constitutional developments offered limited but significant opportunities. The Simon Commission (1928) and the Round Table Conferences (1930–32) enabled Indian women leaders to present their demands for adult suffrage and political equality. Women representatives challenged restrictive franchise qualifications and asserted their role as equal political actors. These efforts contributed to the inclusion of women, albeit on a limited basis, in the Government of India Act, 1935. The Act granted voting rights to women under specific qualifications and reserved seats for women in provincial legislatures, enabling approximately six million women to vote in the 1937 elections.

Women's active participation in the freedom struggle further strengthened their claims to political equality. Leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Nehru, and Aruna Asaf Ali played prominent roles in mass movements, including the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement. Their contributions demonstrated women's leadership capabilities and challenged traditional gender norms. Independence and the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950 marked the culmination of the suffrage movement, as universal adult suffrage was guaranteed without gender discrimination under Article 326 [3].

III. EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN INDIAN POLITICS

The Post-independence India constitutionally recognized women as equal political citizens. However, early political participation remained limited in practice. Women's representation in legislatures was low, and leadership positions were dominated

by men. The emergence of leaders such as Indira Gandhi, who served as Prime Minister, symbolized women's potential in political leadership but did not translate into broader systemic change.

A significant institutional shift occurred with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–93), which mandated 33 percent reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies. This reform transformed grassroots governance by enabling the election of over one million women representatives. The amendments expanded women's political participation at the local level and altered traditional power structures, particularly in rural areas [4].

Despite these gains, women's representation at state and national levels remained persistently low for decades. This gap sustained demands for legislative reservation in higher political institutions. The passage of the Women's Reservation Act in 2023, providing 33 percent reservation in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies, represents a historic milestone in India's democratic evolution. Nevertheless, challenges such as patriarchal party structures, limited access to political finance, and gender-based violence continue to constrain women's substantive participation.

IV. KEY MILESTONES IN WOMEN'S POLITICAL HISTORY

The struggle for women's political rights has followed a global trajectory marked by sustained activism and institutional reform. The nineteenth century witnessed the formal emergence of suffrage movements in the United States and Britain. The early twentieth century brought significant victories, with countries such as New Zealand, Australia, and Finland granting women the vote.

World War I and World War II served as critical turning points by highlighting women's contributions to society and strengthening claims for political equality. The post-war period saw the expansion of women's political rights through international frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and CEDAW. The late twentieth century witnessed women attaining executive leadership roles globally, while contemporary movements continue to challenge structural barriers to political equality [5].

India's experience aligns with these global trends while reflecting its distinct historical and social context. Women's participation in anti-colonial movements and constitutional guarantees of equality positioned India as one of the earliest post-colonial states to adopt universal adult suffrage.

V. PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES, COMMITTEES, AND THE WOMEN'S RESERVATION BILL

After The Indian Constitution guaranteed equality but did not initially provide reservations for women in Parliament. Early opposition to quotas stemmed from the belief that women should compete on equal terms with men. However, persistent underrepresentation led to renewed debates. The 1974 Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India highlighted systemic barriers and revived demands for affirmative action.

Table 1- Deals with procedure for amendment of the bill

Year	Key Event/Action on Women's Reservation Bill	Outcome/Status
1996	81st Constitutional Amendment Bill introduced in Lok Sabha	Referred to Joint Parliamentary Committee led by Geeta Mukherjee; lapsed with House dissolution
1998	Bill reintroduced in 12th Lok Sabha	Did not secure required support; lapsed again
1999	Bill reintroduced	No consensus; lapsed once more
2002	Bill reintroduced	Failed to pass; lapsed
2003	Bill reintroduced	Again failed due to lack of support; lapsed
2008	Bill introduced in Rajya Sabha	Examined by Parliamentary committee; passed Rajya Sabha in 2010, but never voted in Lok Sabha. Lapsed with dissolution of Lok Sabha
2010	Passed by Rajya Sabha	Lok Sabha did not vote; Bill lapsed with dissolution
2023	Introduced as 128th Constitutional Amendment (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam)	Passed by Lok Sabha (20 Sept), Rajya Sabha (21 Sept), received President's assent (28 Sept); becomes law contingent on delimitation post-next census

Subsequent parliamentary debates reflected tensions between democratic equality and social justice. The eventual passage of the Women's Reservation Act in 2023 represents the culmination of decades of advocacy and legislative deliberation. The Act symbolizes a renewed commitment to correcting historical gender imbalances in political representation [6].

The political representation of women in India's parliamentary and legislative structures remains a persistent concern, even as the nation increasingly emphasizes gender equality and social inclusion in public discourse. Women constitute nearly half of India's population, yet their presence in national and state legislatures is still considerably sparse compared to global standards. As of 2024, women account for approximately 15.1% of Lok Sabha (House of the People) seats and 14.4% in the Rajya Sabha (Council of States). In the 18th Lok Sabha, the share of women has risen incrementally over decades—moving from 5-10% before 2004 to the current level of around 13.6-15.1%. Despite this incremental progress, India's global ranking is low: it stands 143rd out of 185 countries in terms of women's representation in the lower house of parliament, far behind countries such as Rwanda (61.3%), Sweden (46%), South Africa (45%), and the United Kingdom (40%). In terms of candidate participation, the increase is notable; while just 45 women contested in 1957, the number rose to 799 in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, yet only 78 women were elected among the 543 members. Party-wise, some exceptions are visible: for instance, the All India Trinamool Congress had 38% women

among its MPs, showing the influence of proactive party-level initiatives. The representation of women in State Legislative Assemblies is even lower, with the national average standing at just 9%. No state in India has more than 20% women legislators in their assemblies. Chhattisgarh leads among the states, achieving 18% women MLAs, while most states report figures well below this threshold, and the average across regions remains static or marginally improved over time. Certain states such as Bihar, Rajasthan, and Odisha have reported higher proportions, attributed to measures like gender quotas at the Panchayati Raj (local governance) level, where women now occupy over 46% of seats due to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment mandating reservations.

India's case thus reflects a paradox: while women's participation as voters is robust and rising (approaching parity with men), this has not been matched by a corresponding rise in women's legislative representation. Key barriers identified include patriarchal social norms, male-dominated party hierarchies, economic hurdles in contesting elections, the burden of caregiving duties, and lack of institutional and social support. For instance, financial constraints severely impede the political aspirations of women—data shows the odds of success for female candidates with assets less than ₹1 crore are extremely low, and independent women candidates are almost never elected without party backing. Case studies and research consistently highlight how party ticket allocation is a critical bottleneck, with most parties hesitant to nominate women in winnable constituencies due to entrenched biases about women's electability. Efforts to address underrepresentation have included legislative initiatives. The 128th Constitutional Amendment Bill, 2023, seeks to reserve one-third of seats in both Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for women. Previous attempts to pass similar legislation lapsed, reflecting the challenges of achieving political consensus despite rhetorical commitments to gender parity. Comparatively, the grass-roots success of women's reservation at the panchayat (village council) level stands in sharp contrast to the slow pace at state and national levels. The panchayat reservation policy, which mandates one-third (and in practice up to 50%) seats for women, has dramatically improved their participation and influence in local governance, offering a viable precedent for scaling up gender quotas. However, translating this success to higher legislative bodies has proven challenging due to deeper structural and cultural impediments [7].

VI. CONCLUSION

Women's political participation in India has evolved from marginalization to constitutional recognition and recent legislative breakthroughs. The integration of women's rights with the nationalist movement, constitutional guarantees of equality, and institutional reforms such as reservations have significantly expanded opportunities for political participation. However, the persistence of structural and cultural barriers underscores the need for continued efforts to transform formal representation into substantive empowerment. The future of Indian democracy depends on ensuring that women's political participation extends beyond numerical presence to meaningful influence and leadership. In summary, despite visible progress and robust debate, the percentage of women in India's national and state legislatures remains significantly below global and regional averages. Sustained political will, reformative party practices, targeted legislative support, and a shift in cultural perceptions of gender roles are widely recognized as prerequisites for creating a more balanced and inclusive political landscape in India. This issue remains at the core of achieving genuine gender equality and enhancing the quality of democratic governance

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