Chapter – 5

POLITICAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN

Right to political participation of women includes their full access to the political and public life without any discrimination. The political sphere includes the government, the parliament and local governing bodies such as municipalities and local councils. Three key actors can be defined as strongly affecting political rights and participation of women in the public and political life: first, decision makers such as governmental institutions and senior staff, the actual political structure and lastly, the media.

Unfortunately the political rights and political participation of women have been ignored by the patriarchal political set up for a very long time. A cursory glance over the history of human civilisation reveals that women have never been recognised as equal partners in the public sphere and political governance in the ancient times. The ancient and medieval political thinkers and the political set-up of that time were against the political participation of women. As a country and as a civilization India is not exceptional in case of exclusion of women from politics and undermining of their political participation. The different periods of Indian history i.e., ancient, medieval and modern have depicted a different picture and roles assigned to women that show the socio-economic and political status of a woman in India. The interaction or linking of Indian civilisation with the other civilisations or outside world has always influenced the socio-cultural and economic role and status of women in India. If the Mughal invasions deteriorated the position of Indian women in Medieval India, India’s interaction or linkage with the English civilisation and other modern civilisations has benefited Indian women. The improvement and

---


progress which Indian women are experiencing today shows that India has also been influenced by the international agenda of women empowerment and India’s commitment to the international norms of democratic and gender-sensitive governance along with the pressure of the non-government and women groups in India. The recent global developments regarding the empowerment and political participation of women have also impacted the social fabric of Indian society.

The recent identification of the girl children and women as a special group and the international acknowledgement of women empowerment as a key issue of the democratic governance are taken as the positive development for the political rights of women. It has also been realised and accepted that genuine commitments and efforts are required to be made by the national and international institutions for the realisation of the political participation and political empowerment of women.

The recognition and protection of women’s rights to participate in political decision-making are widely supported by international law, conventions on the women’s rights and many other human rights instruments of the United Nations Organisation (UNO). The historical development of women’s rights as equal to the men rights is of recent origin and it can be analysed into the three phases.

In the first phase, equal rights of women to men and their right to participation in public and political life has been the recognised by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 recognises that (1) Everyone has the right to participate in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives; (2) Everyone has the right of access, on equal terms, to public service in his country; (3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and
equal suffrage, and by secret vote or by other equivalent procedure that guarantees the freedom of the vote.\(^3\)

The second phase started with the enactment of the Convention on the Political Rights of Women, 1952 and Convention on the Civil and Political Rights, 1966. These were outcome of the initial response of the UNO for the equal participation of women in public and political life. The Convention on the Political Rights of Women recognised under (Article 1) that women have the right to vote in all elections, (Article 2) “Women will be eligible for all elective public bodies, established by national law, on equal terms, without discrimination, (Article 3) Women have the right to hold public office and perform all public functions, established by national law, on equal terms with men, without discrimination.\(^4\)

Another important development is the recognition of a woman right to nationality separately from her husband, under the Convention on the Nationality of Married women, 1957.\(^5\) This convention recognised that a conflict in law and practice with reference to nationality of a woman arises as a result of provisions concerning the loss or acquisition of nationality by a woman as a result of marriage, or its dissolution, or of the change of nationality by husband during their married life. It is provided under this convention that the contracting parties will assure that marriage by a woman and the change of nationality by the husband will not affect the nationality of the wife without her consent.


The milestone for the recognition of women rights and elimination of violence against women is laid down by the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which is also considered as the Human Rights Bill of Women. This treaty upholds the following rights of women: Women’s right to vote in all general elections and referendum, to be elected to general assemblies, women’s right to participate in the formulation and implementation of governmental policies and to hold public office and women’s right to participation in non-governmental and socio-political organizations.  

The Third phase of the development of women’s rights started with the advent of the globalisation and the linking of world market. The decades of 1980’s and 1990’s have been viewed as the new beginning for the protection of human rights, development and empowerment of women at the global level. Integration of national economies into the global economy is increasingly shifting the formulation and implementation of policy away from local and national levels to the international level. Its increased shift of governance to the international arena may undermine the modernist notion of citizenship, which over the years provided women movements with a strong ground for advancing their civil identity and claims for equal rights vis-à-vis the sovereign state.

The interaction of the local people at the global level and movements from below has been helping the people across the globe now to assert their alternative identities for the weaker sections in general and for women in particular. At the same time, however, globalisation is generating an unprecedented understanding that social, economic and political rights of women are part of the international human rights discourse. Similarly, the growing force of international women movement and their influence over the governmental processes are empowering women and creating a new space for women organisations at the international, national and local levels to grow.

6 Ibid
The free flow of knowledge and easy access to the means of information has helped women groups and organisations to establish a global network. The local and global linkage has provided a new platform to women’s organisations and groups to share their suffering, success and experience which they are facing in their day to day life across the globe. The global connection and connectivity is not only helping women to enhance their skills and knowledge to generate resources for their development and empowerment but also providing the crucial support and input during the women’s struggle against national political set-up and demand for inclusive and gender sensitive development.

The international efforts which were initiated in 1970’s for the development of women have witnessed a new turn with the advent of globalisation and the international urge for the development of women has been transformed into the urge for women empowerment. The Third World Conference on Women has focused on the political rights and participation of women and adopted The Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the development and empowerment of women.

The Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies, adopted by the conference, provides a blueprint for action until 2000 that link the promotion and maintenance of peace to the eradication of violence against women throughout the broad spectrum of society. The document urges member states to take constitutional and legal steps to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, and tailor national strategies to facilitate the participation of women in efforts to promote peace and development: equality in social participation; equality in political participation; and decision-making. The conference also acknowledged that women need to participate in all areas of human activity,

not just those areas that are related to gender. The greatest achievement of the Nairobi conference is that, despite the acute differences dividing the 157 member states, representatives were able to find a common ground on all the issues addressed and unanimously adopt the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies.

The Fourth World Conference on Women and Beijing Platform of Action, Millennium Development Goals from 2001 onwards and UN Women efforts along with the efforts of United Nations General Assembly, World Bank, UNIFEM are worth mentioning. The gender mainstream and the inclusion of gender in world development, peace and democratic governance are the utmost concerns of the international governance since 1990’s. Irrespective of the international efforts of the UN and NGOs many other legislative measures have been adopted by the national governments for the inclusion of women in national development and governance.

Empowering women for stronger political participation and political empowerment of women has become the core concern of global governance and it has been considered to be an important component of national and international governance. Since the Beijing Platform of Action, many other strategies and declarations have been adopted by the UN and the state parties to enhance the political participation of women. Irrespective of the global and national efforts, many women organisations are working at the grass-roots level to make women aware of their rights and importance of the women’s political participation.

---


10 Hafner Burton Emilie and A. Pollack Mark, Mainstreaming Gender in Global Governance, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2000, pp.278-289.

11 Ibid, p. 77.

12 United Nations, n.9, pp.11-12.
The struggle of women to achieve parity with men in leadership and decision-making within the public institutions of states, politics and governments is an important arena of political action and discourse for contemporary women’s movements. At the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW, Beijing 1995), a global consensus has been developed by the women’s organisation on the women’s advancement in the public sphere through the institutionalisation of national machineries for women, as well as, the affirmative action of the gender quota in policy and decision-making spaces. In response, a significant number of women’s groups and individual feminist NGOs in the developing societies took up the challenge of addressing the issues and are challenging the male domination on politics.

The UN conferences also fostered the growth of transnational feminist movements. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) held meetings parallel to the UN Conferences. Attendance at the NGO forums grew considerably over time from 1,000 in 1975 to 30,000 in 1995. These grass root connections complement and support the connections made among official governmental delegates. The increasing number and activism of women’s NGOs ensured that other UN conferences and specialised agencies would also address the gender dimension. For example, since the early 1980s, under the rubric of Women in Development, the United Nations Development Programmes has considered the impact of its programmes and policies on women. Women’s concerns have figured prominently in a variety of UN conferences, especially in the 1990s, including the 1994 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the 1995 International Conference on Population and Development, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, and the 1995 World Summit for Social Development.13

Around the globe, women movements have attempted to give legitimacy to the demand for gender quotas by referring to the landmark document i.e., the

Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). Firstly the Beijing Platform talks about ‘discriminatory attitudes and practices’ and ‘unequal power relations’ that leads to women under-representation in political decision-making. Whereas previously the focus was on women’s lack of resources or lack of will to participate in politics, attention is now directed towards those institutional and cultural mechanisms of exclusion that prevent women from obtaining an equal share of positions in most political institutions. More importantly, in this new discourse, the responsibility for promoting change is shifted from the individual woman to the institutions themselves, which are expected to identify and correct the causes of women’s under-representation.

Secondly, the demand for a minimum level of representation for women is being challenged by a new discourse of equal representation, often expressed by the term gender balance in decision making. The Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) “50-50” campaign is a good example of this new discourse. The goal is no longer described as ‘more women in politics’ but rather as ‘equal participation’ and ‘equitable distribution of power and decision-making at all levels’. Somewhat contradictory, however, the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) also speaks of securing a ‘critical mass’, the latter often associated with figures of 20% or 30% women.\(^{14}\)

Thirdly, affirmative action is suggested as a possible means to women’s equal participation in political decision-making, although the word ‘quota’ is not used directly in the BPFA. For governmental and public administration positions, it is recommended that the national governments should use ‘specific targets and should implement measure to improve women’s political participation through positive action. Concerning elections, the BPFA urges governments to commit themselves to ‘take measures in electoral systems to encourage political parties to integrate women in elective and non-elective

public positions in the same proportion and at the same level as men.\(^{15}\) Political parties should ‘consider examining party structures and exclusions that prevent women from obtaining an equal share of positions in most political institutions. More importantly, in this new discourse, the responsibility for promoting change is shifted from the individual woman to the institutions themselves, which are expected to identify and correct the causes of women’s under-representation.

Across Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe, women are asserting for their rights and entering the halls of formal power. The Arab Springs, influence of feminist movements and the global feminism have increased the political participation of women even in the oil rich economies. The liberal democratic set-up of the present world has helped women and feminist groups to enter the government offices and their share in the public affairs is increasing day by day. The political identity of women is transforming from voters to active participants and potential leaders. Women voters are taking more interest in the elections and their voting percentage is increasing.\(^{16}\)

The power or rather potential power of women is also being increasingly recognised in traditional mainstream structures of the international governance. The importance of women’s role in world peace, environment protection and sustainable development has been recognised by the World Bank and other international organisations. Globalisation has also helped the international women movements to attract the world attention for the development and empowerment of women and women’s role in the governance and conflict resolution is being emphasised in these days.

\(^{15}\) Ibid, pp. 729-732.

Not only national and regional conflicts but internal warfare has also become a legitimate subject of international concern. In this context, the potential for women to play significant role in peace negotiations looms on the horizon. In October 2000, the UN held an unprecedented session of the Security Council to listen women from such war-torn countries such as Somalia and Guatemala, and to consider the contribution of women who have been trying to ensure the pursuit of world peace. This process resulted in the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women and Peace and Security, calling for the inclusion of more women in peace negotiations and peacekeeping forces.\textsuperscript{17}

The immediate challenge for the International Women's Movements is to mobilise women and to take a lead in building a new political order, which will be better suited to women empowerment. New institutions, if they result from a process in which women are integrally involved, are likely to serve the cause of equality and other fundamental human rights much more effectively than the current institutions of political power. Many international conferences have agreed to reach the target of 30\% representation of women in government.

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union report 2012,(for one or both houses) Rwanda, Sweden, Cuba, Finland, Argentina, Netherlands, Denmark, Costa Rica, Spain, Norway, Belgium, Mozambique, Nepal, Iceland, New Zealand, South Africa, Angola, Germany, Uganda, Burundi, Belarus, Tanzania, Guyana, Andorra, Ecuador and Macedonia etc. have achieved the target.

An increasing number of countries are currently introducing various types of gender quotas in public elections to reach a gender balance in political institutions. Most developing countries introduced electoral gender quotas during the 1990s, mainly due to the influence of the UN Conference on Women held in Beijing. However, most developed countries adopted gender quotas 10 or 15 years prior to the Conference.

A dramatic change has taken place in the established rank order of countries regarding the level of women’s political representation. The five Nordic countries, which for many years were almost alone at the top of the list, are now being challenged by amazingly fast development in a number of countries around the globe. For example, Rwanda superseded Sweden as number one in the world in terms of women’s parliamentary representation with 48.8% women in parliament against Sweden’s 45.3% in 2003, and now it has more than 50% of seats for women legislators since 2008.\textsuperscript{18}

The core idea behind the gender quota systems is to recruit women into political positions and to ensure that women are not isolated in political life. The evidence suggests that women tend to have systematically different preferences for household spending. The incorporation of women’s concerns in decision-making would, thereby, improve the nature of the public spending. In addition, women’s representation can also have an indirect influence by increasing men’s attention to policies concerning women and children. Quota systems, therefore, aim at ensuring that women constitute a certain number or percentage of the members of a public body, whether it is a candidate list, parliamentary assembly, a committee, or a government.\textsuperscript{19}

There are now some 100 countries which have legislated candidate quotas for women, several of them have been implementing candidate quotas since the early 1990’s. Where quotas are legislated, political parties have usually had to update their party nomination procedures to ensure compliance with the law. In addition to legislated quotas, hundreds of political parties in more than 30 countries have voluntarily adopted their own policies of quotas for women. In


such cases, the party sets its own target or proportion of candidates it considers suitable for women in the elections.\textsuperscript{20} Although the methods of the reservation of seats in politics and gender quota in politics is yet a matter of debate and varies from country to country. In some countries the gender quota has become the legislative law and in some countries the political parties are adopting voluntary quotas for women. Till date, 61% countries have adopted voluntary party quotas and 38% have legislated candidate quotas and 20% have reserved seats.\textsuperscript{21}

In January 2014, 46 countries boasted having more than 30% women members in parliament at least in one chamber, up from 42 countries the previous year. More women are now holding some of the so-called “hard” ministerial portfolios—such as Defence, Foreign Affairs and the Environment. Women members of parliament account for 21.8% of all parliamentary seats in January 2014, up from 20.3% the previous year. Rwanda maintains its leadership with the election of women to 64% of the seats in its lower house.

By the end of 2013, only five chambers worldwide had no women in parliament. The proportion of women holding seats in parliament increased to 42% in 64 chambers in 2013 worldwide. The proportion of women rose at a fast pace, by more than 20%, in two chambers of Grenada’s lower house to (33.3%) and Zimbabwe’s upper house to (47.5%). These were followed by four countries: Saudi Arabia, Cameroon, Zimbabwe and Equatorial Guinea, with an increase of more than 15% in the lower houses. However, women’s share declined in 14 chambers. Legislated or voluntary quotas were used in 39 chambers holding elections. Such measures have had a positive influence on


women’s access to parliament. However, quotas alone are not enough political parties need to field more women candidates.22

The year 2013 also witnessed a growing awareness of the importance of ending political violence against women. Pre and post-electoral violence which includes intimidation, physical assault and other forms of aggression towards candidates and elected women, violence is a common deterrent to women’s political participation in any part of the world. Countries such as Bolivia and Mexico have taken the lead by passing legislation to redress such issues that deter women from political involvement. The percentage of women in ministerial posts at the executive level of government reached 17.2% in 2014, up from 16.1% in 2008. By January 2014, there were 36 countries with 30% or more women ministers. Nicaragua headed the global table with women holding 57% of ministerial positions, followed by Sweden, Finland, France and Norway.23

Political commitments and policies are key components to women’s progress in this area. Another positive trend has been that not only traditionally so-called “soft” portfolios—such as Social Affairs, Education and Women’s Affairs continue to be more commonly held by women ministers, but these days more women are holding some of the so-called “hard” ministerial portfolios—such as Defence, Foreign Affairs and the Environment.

In contrast to these more positive trends, there has been a slight decline in the number of women Heads of State/Heads of Government and Speakers of Parliament. Since 2012, the number of female Heads of State or Heads of Government in the world has decreased slightly, from 19 to 18. Meanwhile, the percentage of female Speakers of Parliament has barely risen—from 14.2% in 2012, to 14.8% in 2013.24

23 Ibid.
Gender quota has been increasing around the globe and both the developing and developed countries are forced to include women in national governance under the impact of strong women’s movements. The transnational feminism and universal concerns restraining patriarchy and reducing subordination of women among the feminist groups have developed solidarity between the transnational women groups. Today, electoral gender quotas are being introduced in nations where women have so far been almost entirely excluded from politics, as well as in societies with a long history of women involvement in the labour market and in political life, such as the Scandinavian countries. The introduction of effective quota system represents a shift in approach, from ‘equal opportunity’ to ‘equality of results.’

The Institution of quotas and the subsequent increase in women leadership manifests the true reforms behind gender equality. Proponents of globalisation may correlate rising women leadership as part of the process of globalisation but it is not globalisation alone; there are many other social, economic and political developments at the national level in almost all the countries round the globe, which occurred due to the democratisation, modernisation and development of scientific temper, which are breaking the age-old social barriers and increasing opportunities for women to participate in politics.  

The gender quota and the reservation of the political seats for women have given rise to the development of different discourses and perspectives on the political empowerment and political participation of women. Presently, there are four important debates on the question of political participation of women both at the global level as well as in India. One debate tries to look at the women’s participation as part of “empowering women” particularly as a political category.  

25 Franceschet, et.al, n.20, pp. 18-19.

26 C. Pardia Subhas and Samita Nayak, Empowerment of Women India, Northern Book Centre, New Delhi, 2009, pp.192-196.
The second debate tries to argue that voting rights or suffrage will remain as symbolisms or “Political Tokenism” rather than actualising political participation of women in traditional societies such as India, Pakistan etc. The third debate looks at suffrage as an essential component for creating egalitarian society and the final debate argues that political participation especially through “Quota” or reservation, does not necessarily lead to social emancipation of women, as women are still without property rights and gender bias still operates at a large level.

**Women Participation and the Indian Politics since Independence**

The political participation of women and their engagement in electoral process is an important marker of the maturity and efficacy of democracy in any country. It can be defined not only in terms of the equality and freedom under which they share political power with men, but also in terms of the liberty and space provided for women in the democratic framework of electoral politics.

The recognition of the equal citizenship and political participation of women in India at the time of Independence has not happened suddenly, but Indian women fought a long battle during the freedom struggle for equal rights and citizenship. The second important issue is that the providing of the equal rights has been accepted by Indian society or political elite in practice or not. The history of the women movements and women emancipation has revealed that Indian women have passed through the dark ages in late ancient, medieval and the early period of modern India. Although freedom and independence of India have brought many changes in the socio-political, economic and legal set-up of Indian society, it has remained relatively unchanged to women and to the other weaker classes of Indian society.

---


The Constitution of India promulgated in 1950 promised, “to secure to all its citizens justice, social, economic and political” and “equality of status and of opportunity” through several provisions like documents on fundamental rights and directive principles. The constitution of India is considered as one of the best constitutions in the world which has taken care of the underprivileged and the minorities. All the laws get their sanction from this constitution and any law which violates a provision of the constitution is declared unconstitutional. Several articles have been incorporated in the constitution in order to achieve the desired objective of equality and justice for women in India. Besides the preamble, the articles of the constitution, which impinge on our subject of enquiry are Articles 14, 15, 16 under part III, Articles 39, 42, 44 under part IV, Article 51-A (c) under part IV-A and Article 246 under part XI of India’s constitution are noteworthy.

India proved its commitment to the political participation of women many times both at the national and international levels. It has signed many conventions of UNO and international declarations on the rights of women, irrespective of the signing of Memorandum of Understandings (MOU) with the other states and NGOs for the development and empowerment of women. In 2009 Indian government signed an MOU with the Norwegian Embassy and UNIFEM to initiate a three year programme entitled promoting women’s political leadership and governance in India and South Asia. This programme aims at empowering elected women representatives in local governance to make public policy and resources allocation patterns responsive to women’s human rights. The programme covers 5 countries of South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Pakistan). In India the programme is co-owned by UNIFEM and Ministry of Panchayati Raj.


31 Ibid, p.43.
The Common Wealth, likewise, has also been addressing the issue and has taken a number of initiatives for the purpose of enhancing women’s representation in power. In 1995 in a meeting the Common Wealth Heads of Government endorsed the Plan of Action on gender and development, which was to be utilised by the member countries to increase women participation in political decision making at all levels. At their 1996 meeting, Common Wealth Ministers of Women’s affairs recommended that the member countries should try to achieve the target of 30% quota for women in political and public sector by the year 2005.32 The need to increase women’s participation in political decision making and peace process in Common wealth was also a part of agenda of the Common Wealth ministers responsible for women’s affairs, in their sixth meeting held in Delhi in 2000.33

The commitment of Indian leadership for the equal political rights of women has been reflected through the Indian commitment to human rights, conventions and declarations on women rights. As it is mentioned above that the development of women rights and status are subject to both the internal as well as external factors. Although India signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952), Convention on the Nationality of Married women (1957) and Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), the political participation of women has remained the subject of internal factors and the socio-economic and political set-up of Indian society.34

A glance over the development perspective and the inclusion of women in nation-building can reveal India’s commitment to women’s development and empowerment. The planned development through the five year plans has been

34 Gupta, n.5, p.8.
considered as the most emancipating strategy for the development and empowerment of the weaker sections. The study of socio-economic and political development of women has also remained a subject of five-year plans of Indian government; so, the analysis of the five year plans becomes necessary to evaluate women empowerment in India.

The approach in the First Five Year plan (1951-56) was to provide adequate services to promote the welfare of women so that they can play their legitimate role in the family and the community. It was noted that the position and functions of women differ to a great extent in different communities and, therefore, community welfare agencies will have to work their programme and activities according to the specific requirements of the different communities across India.35

The Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Plans continued the same approach for the welfare of women. The concept of Women’s development was mainly welfare oriented and was clubbed with other categories of welfare schemes such as schemes meant for children, old people and the disabled.36 The end of the Fourth Plan has seen the release of the monumental report of Committee on Status of Women in India entitled “Towards Equality”, which revealed that the dynamics of development has adversely affected a large section of women and created new imbalances and disparities. The Report led to a debate in Parliament and the emergence of new consciousness of women as critical inputs for national development rather than as targets for welfare policies.37

CSWI report and its discussion in the parliament on the impact of five years plans on women’s development has definitely led to the transformation of the


concept of women’s development in India from family welfare to the women’s development in the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85), which recognised women as participants in development and not merely as objects of welfare. The Plan adopted a multi-disciplinary approach with a special thrust on the three core sectors of health, education and employment.\textsuperscript{38} In the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90), the basic approach was to inculcate confidence among women and bring about an awareness of their own potential for development; special measures were initiated for strict enforcement of the Dowry Prohibition Act and also to prevent harassment and atrocities on women.\textsuperscript{39} The Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-97) saw the setting up of National Commission for Women (1992), Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (1993), Mahila Samriddhi Yojana (1993) and Indira Mahila Yojana (1995) for the upliftment and empowerment of women in India. National Policy for the Empowerment of Women was also drafted, during the eighth five year plan.\textsuperscript{40}

Empowerment of Women being one of the primary objectives of the Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002), efforts were made to create an enabling environment where women can freely exercise their rights both within and outside the home as equal partners to their male counterparts. This was realised through early finalisation and adoption of the National Policy for Empowerment of Women, which laid down definite goals, targets and policy prescriptions along with a well defined Gender Development Index to monitor the impact of its implementation in raising the status of women from time to time.\textsuperscript{41}


\textsuperscript{41} Anitha Anand, “Engendering the Plan”, \textit{The Hindu}, April 6, 1997, p.4, also see, Government of India, \textit{Country Report Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing
Empowerment of Women as Agents of Social Change and Development was continued in the Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-2007). Towards this a Sector-specific 3-fold strategy was adopted based on the National Policy for Empowerment of Women (2001). They were as follows: Social Empowerment, Economic Empowerment and Gender Justice. The Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-12) was aimed at inclusive growth and development. Its vision was that every woman in the country should be able to develop to her full potential and share the benefits of economic growth and prosperity. Towards this end the approach adopted was to empower women and recognise their agency thereby seeking to make them partners in their own development. It sought to do this by mainstreaming gender in all sectors as well as by undertaking targeted interventions.

The Government’s National Common Minimum Programme has laid down six basic principles of governance, one of which is to empower women politically, educationally, economically and legally. Gender equality is also at the core of the achievement of Millennium Development Goals, which relate substantially to progress in the life conditions of women and children.

Although the 12th Five Years Plan did not mention any direct strategy for the political empowerment of women, but it provided with certain measures to promote the networking of women groups and the empowerment of women through the inclusive growth. The recommendations for the reservation of some seats for the single women in the government sector and subsidised loans along with the training of women have also been provided under the plan. To

---

1995, Department of Women and Child Development Ministry of Human Resources Development, New Delhi, p. 27.


promote network among the single women this plan proposed promoting and strengthening federations of single women at the block and district level.\textsuperscript{44}

The most notable for the women’s empowerment is that it could not be featured in the first five ‘Five Year Plans’ and the issue of women development was merged with the family welfare measures up to the fifth five year plan. A shift from welfare to development was recognised in the sixth five year plan and it took one decade more to recognise the empowerment of women as the constituent of government plans.

The CSWI report “Toward equality” (1974) reveals that political parties have tended to see women voters as the appendages of the males. It also refers to the tokenism involved in having a few women’s rights on account of their dependent and minority status. Recognising the ‘tokenism’ inherent in associating women representatives through election and nomination in local bodies, the report suggests a more meaningful role of women in the structure of local administration. The question of reservation of seats was left to the government to be included in the national perspective plan for women. It recognised that political participation of women is severely restricted and suggested that a 30 % quota for women be introduced at all levels of electoral bodies.\textsuperscript{45}

After much political pressure and many campaigns by the women organisations, the process for reservation of seats in the local self-government was initiated by the Congress government headed by Rajiv Gandhi. The entire issue took a political hue as it became a moot point whether the introduction or reservation at the level of panchayats and urban local bodies was really meant to give increased representation to women or was a populist measure aiming to


\textsuperscript{45} Report of the Committee on Status of Women in India, n.37, p. 308.
create a women’s constituency at a time when the congress party needed to reconstruct its image.

It was in 1992 that the 73rd Constitutional Amendment was enacted by the Congress government of Narshima Rao for the 33% of reservation of women in the three tiers of the Panchayati Raj and the 74th constitutional amendment was enacted in 1993, which provided for 33% reservation for women in urban local bodies.

The 73rd constitutional amendment added the following articles to the constitution providing reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institution. Article 243-(D) (2) states that not less than 1/3 of the seats reserved under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to S.C or S.T as the case may be.

Article 243 (D) (3) extends political reservation to women stating that not less than 1/3 of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats shall be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a panchayat.

Article 243 (D) (4) extends reservation to the elected offices as well. The office of chairperson in the panchayats or any other level shall be reserved for S.C. or S.T woman in such a manner as legislature of a state.

Detailed set of recommendations were issued to all governmental and non-governmental organisation to enhance women’s political participation and their decision making power. The issue has also repeatedly come up in the non-governmental organisational-meetings of South Asia Watch (SAW) Asia Pacific Women’s Watch (APWW) as a priority issue. The women’s Political Participation in 21st Century and Challenges was the theme for a meeting organised by UNDP in New Delhi from March 24-26, 1999. The meeting

46 Gupta, n.5, p. 8.
engaged women politician and representatives of civil society from all regions, in a dialogue to promote the sharing of experience and building alliances. It concluded that until gender parity is reached in governance, women cannot reach full equality with men in any sphere.  

Thus, women are making significant gains in the political sphere and increased participation is rapidly empowering them, boosting their confidence, changing perceptions regarding their contribution, and improving their status and position in society. For example, political participation and grassroot democracy have been strengthened considerably by the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments that have created new democratic institutions for local governance. In the last 23 years of Panchayati Raj India has witnessed a dramatic change as the women members and heads have been trained in politics and policy-making strengthens their political participation. The day to day experiences to which women have gained at the grass-root level in spite of resistance from the established patriarchal politics has enriched their experiences and their movements across India.

Women are now accepted by the male-dominated politics of village community and they are participating in the decision making equally with their counterparts; the numbers of women members has increased now. As per latest data of grass-root democracy, there are 28 lac elected panchayat representatives, of which around 10 lac are estimated to be women. The average of women representation in panchayats across the country is 36.94%. However, few states have gone beyond the mandated of 33% and provided more reservation for women. For instance Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarkhand and Rajasthan have reserved 50% seats for women and Sikkim has reserved

---


The 110th Constitutional Amendment Bill 2009 provides an increase in reservation for women from 33% to 50% in the Panchayat Raj Institutions. The bill seeks to amend the Article 243 D to enhance the quantum of reservation for women from 1/3 to one-half of the total seats in the Panchayats. Similar reservation shall be provided among the total number of officers or chairpersons.\footnote{Ibid.}

After the national consensus around this demand resulted in the adoption of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution in 1993, in central government introduced 33% reservation for women in institutions of local governance. In 1995 the question of affirmative action for women was raised again, but this time the focus was on Parliament and State Legislatures. Initially, most political parties agreed to introduce 33 % reservation for women in Parliament and State Legislatures in order to attract women voters. The 1996 election manifestoes of almost all the political parties echoed this demand, but soon discord and dissensions surfaced.

When the bill addressing this issue was introduced in the Eleventh Lok Sabha in 1996, several parties and groups raised objections. The objections focused around two main issues: first, the issue of overlapping quotas for women in general and those for women of the lower castes; second, the issue of elitism. The bill was first introduced by Dev Gowda led United Front Government. But persistent demands for a sub-quota for other backward classes and minorities resulted in its being referred to a Parliamentary Committee headed by Gita
Mukherjee, which recommended its passage, rejecting the demand for sub-quotas, despite differences among members on the various issues involved.

The demand for sub-quotas for OBCs and minorities is seen, again to be merely a way of stalling reservation for women; there are no instances of political parties having such quotas in their own cadres. The bill has already been introduced five times, but has been stalled each time. The ugly scenes witnessed in Parliament at the time seem to indicate a devaluation of the agenda of women’s empowerment. Sex as the basis of reservations and the electoral strategies which are perceived to be behind the bill, continues to be a contentious issue even among those strongly committed to the cause of women’s empowerment.

On March 9, 2010, Rajya Sabha took a ‘historic’ resolution by voting (191 for and 1 against) to amend the Constitution, providing one-third reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies for women.\(^5\) Till today, the bill has not been passed by the Lok Sabha. It also requires the ratification of one-half of the states before it comes into effect. Assuming that the Women’s Reservation Bill gets signed into law, how will it work on the ground? If women gain control of one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies, what will be its effect on their male counterparts? How will rotation of seats work in practice? Who decides which seat goes to women? First, the key features of the bill: one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies will be reserved for women.

In case of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the reservation will work as a quota within quota; a third of the seats currently reserved for the two categories will be sub-reserved for SC / ST women. Reservation of seats for women will be in rotation and will cease 15 years after the commencement of the act. Seat allocation will be done in a manner determined by Parliament through enactment of a law.

\(^5\) Fadia,n.3,pp. 548-549.
The following are the implications of the legislation: Since one-third of the seats will be reserved during each general election, each seat in the Lok Sabha and each seat in each of the Assembly will have one reserved and two free terms in the course of three elections. In a 15 year time limit, this will translate as each seat getting reserved for women just once provided, of course, that governments complete their terms and elections are held once every five years. If there are six instead of three elections during this period, each seat will get reserved twice, after 15 years, each seat will have been reserved at least once, the idea being that women representatives should have the reach and spread across the country.

The first measurement of the political rights and political participation is the right to be elected for political and public office. Regarding the constitutional and legal provisions there is no barrier upon women to participate in the political and public life, many special provisions have been enacted by the Indian government to enhance the political participation of women. A glance at the issue of women’s participation in elections as voters and as contestants for political power and the elections to the Parliament can reveal the wide gap between theory and practice of women’s political participation in India.

Despite the constitutional promulgation, women in the Indian subcontinent continue to be grossly under-represented in the legislatures, both at the national and the state levels. Women’s representation in the lower house (Lok Sabha) of the Indian Parliament is still much less than the world average of 20%, lower than the “critical mass” required introducing gender parity in political decision-making and legislation. Similarly, the number of female representatives in legislative bodies in most of the states in India is also below the 20% mark reflecting a pan-Indian gender exclusion from electoral participation and quality representation.

The marginalisation of Indian women in electoral participation stems mainly from inter-party competition, as national political parties and regional parties in the states discriminate not only in terms of seat allotments in the electoral fray,
but also in the party rank and file and chain of command. This could be attributed to a large extent to the party competition structure in the Indian subcontinent that is encumbered by inherent male dominance and a patriarchal mindset that excludes women from the electoral process. In contrast to the poor allotment rates of seats to women by political parties in the electoral process and their marginalisation within the party structure, female electoral participation as voters has seen a notable upsurge in the late 1990s as voter turnout figures of three general elections held in the last decade indicate.52

The electoral participation of women in India is a much discussed issue with a wide range of opinions and differences. On the one hand, some theorists argue that the electoral process in India is fraught with male patriarchy and dominance that act as impediments to women participation. The lack of political voice and poor representation of women in Parliament is a result of their exclusions on gender basis. On the other, there are theorists who, dispute this argument, feel that the increased participation of women in electoral competition in the 1990s as voters and sharing of political power at the grassroots level reveal that electoral politics in India is no more gender exclusive but is quite inclusive. They feel that due to the strength and determination of women’s movements in different parts of India, as well as government regulated quotas, female presence in the political arena is increasing, particularly in terms of voting patterns and decision-making power, as well as in access to positions in public office.53

The number of women contesting elections has always been low, as may be seen from the table below. The highest number of women contestants has been merely 6.39% in 2014, while the number of male contestants has always been


in thousands, the highest being 13353 in 1996. It is important to note that the percentage of winners among women has consistently been more than that of men. Although electoral studies holds that political parties discriminate against women while distributing the party tickets for elections and the women candidates are given the tickets of those constituencies where party position is weak and the chances of winning the seats are low. For example in 1996 only 3.8% of male candidates won, in comparison to 6.7 % of female candidates. Likewise, the percentage of winners was 11.2 % for men and 15.7% for women in 1998, 12.3% and 17.3 % in 1999, 6.44% and 10.61% in 2009 and 6.39% and 9.74%, respectively in 2014 (16th Lok Sabha).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% of Males Winning</th>
<th>% of Females Winning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>1831</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>26.05</td>
<td>51.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>1473</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1518</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>60.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>1915</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>2302</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>2369</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>44.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>2698</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>2784</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>24.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>2369</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>2439</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>27.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>4478</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>4620</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>5406</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>5574</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>25.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>5962</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>6160</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>13.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>8374</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>8699</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>12.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>13353</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>13952</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>6.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>4476</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>4750</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>15.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>3976</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>4254</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>17.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>5080</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>5435</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>12.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2514</td>
<td>556</td>
<td>8070</td>
<td>6.44</td>
<td>10.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>7527</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>8163</td>
<td>6.39</td>
<td>9.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Government of India, Statistical Reports of Lok Sabha Elections, Election Commission of India, New Delhi.
The analysis of the women voters and the seats won by them in various elections to the parliament since independence can give a lead to understand the theory and practice of women empowerment in Indian democracy.

### Table- D (2)
The Voting Percentage in Various Lok Sabha Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Election</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>53.00</td>
<td>37.10</td>
<td>61.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>56.00</td>
<td>38.77</td>
<td>62.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>53.31</td>
<td>46.63</td>
<td>55.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>66.90</td>
<td>55.48</td>
<td>61.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>60.90</td>
<td>49.11</td>
<td>55.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>65.63</td>
<td>54.91</td>
<td>60.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>62.16</td>
<td>51.22</td>
<td>56.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>68.18</td>
<td>58.60</td>
<td>63.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>66.13</td>
<td>57.32</td>
<td>61.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>61.58</td>
<td>51.35</td>
<td>56.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>62.06</td>
<td>53.41</td>
<td>57.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>65.72</td>
<td>57.88</td>
<td>61.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>63.97</td>
<td>55.64</td>
<td>59.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>61.65</td>
<td>53.35</td>
<td>58.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>55.8</td>
<td>58.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>67.69</td>
<td>65.63</td>
<td>66.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Government of India, Statistical Reports of Lok Sabha Elections, Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

The above Table shows that from the first general election onwards, women’s participation by way of voting has been growing but not steadily. It has shown that there was a constant rise from 37.10% in 1952 to 38.77% in 1957 and 46.63% and 55.48% in 1962 and 1967 general elections respectively. In the following elections the women’s percentage of voting kept on fluctuating. In 1984 there was a greater turnout of women voters i.e. 58.60% but it remained
10% lower in comparison to the male voting percentage (68.18). But again it declined to 57.32% in 1989 and 51.35% in 1991. Women voting percentage increased 1996 to 1999 and again it declined to 53.35 in 2004 and 55.8% in 2009. Women voter percentage increased in 2014 to 65.63%. But if compare the rise of voting percentage with the elected women members of Lok Sabha, then the data show that the growing participation of women in voting could not translate into corresponding increase in the number of women members in Lok Sabha.

The percent of elected women in Lok Sabha members has never exceeded 12%. The following table reveals the percentage of women representation in Lok Sabha elections since the first general elections in 1952.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>Women MPs</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>517</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>7.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>9.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>8.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>10.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Total Members</td>
<td>Women Members</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>11.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>531.06</td>
<td>36.89</td>
<td>6.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Government of India, Statistical Reports of Lok Sabha Elections, Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

The above table shows that in the first Lok Sabha, out of 499 seats there were 22 (4.41%) women members elected to the lower house of parliament in 1952. In the subsequent elections, the number of women members has been fluctuating with some variation. It was in 1984 that the highest number of women members, i.e. 44 (8.9%) out of 544 members entered the Lok Sabha. But this trend was not seen in the following elections. Their number was only 27 (5.22%) in 1989 which increased to 39 (7.17%) in 1991. The number of women members i.e., 61 (11.23%) in 2014 was the highest.

The presence of women in the upper house has been slightly higher than in the lower house probably due to indirect elections and nominations of some women members. It was in 1990 when 38 women were elected to the Rajya Sabha i.e., the upper house of Indian Parliament and it achieved the highest-ever target of 15.5% in the history of Indian politics. Nonetheless, this representation does not even come close to 20%. Although India’s commitment to the various international declarations and agreements for women’s political participation is 30%, till date no house of parliament could cross the 50% of the desired political participation of women in India. It is significant to note that the deputy chairperson of the Rajya Sabha for at least more than 25 years has been a woman, yet women in Indian political set-up face a tough competition from male politicians for nomination.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Seats</th>
<th>No of Women</th>
<th>% of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>238.21</td>
<td>22.92</td>
<td>9.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Government of India, Statistical Reports of Rajya Sabha, Elections Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

The above table shows that the share of women’s representation in the Rajya Sabha is marginal in comparison to men. It can also be observed that the political parties in India are not in favour of increasing women’s share in the parliament because it symbolises an increase in their political power. As the nomination and the election of the members of upper-house is through indirect method and the election of the members of the upper house is also a subject matters of political parties rather than that of voters as happens in the direct elections.
The scenario of power sharing by the women in the Union Council of Ministers between 1985 and 2014 has also been low. The data shown in table-D (5) presents the figures of women ministers in centre from 1985 to 2014.

**Table- D (5)**

**Representation of Women in the Union Council of Ministers (1985-2014)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>No. of Minister</th>
<th>No. of Women Minister</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cabinet Minister</td>
<td>Minister of State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Government of India, Statistical Reports of Lok Sabha Elections, Election Commission of India, New Delhi, first phase of Narendra Modi’s council of Ministers which took 9th on May 26, 2014.

The above table shows the share of women in the Union Council of Ministers and Cabinet from 1985 to 2014. The scenario of women’s representation is so grim that there was only one Woman Cabinet Ministers and just 3 women were ministers of State in the Union Council of Ministers in 1985. The number of women cabinet ministers has never crossed the figure of 1 from 1985 to 1998, in fact, the number of women cabinet minister remained zero in the governments of 1990, 1995, 1996, 1997 & 1998. Although there were a few women members who remained the Ministers of State and Deputy Ministers, no
women was holding an independent portfolio. It is to mention that the period from 1990 to 1998 is also presented as the initial period of globalisation, political instability and coalition governments in the country.

The scenario changed in 2001, when 3 women were designated Cabinet Ministries, 2 were designated Ministers of State and 4 were designated Deputy Ministers in the Council of Ministers at the Union level. There were only 7 women in the council of 76 ministers in 2002. The scenario remained almost the same in 2004 as again 7 women were included in the Council of 66 ministers. Just one number increased in 2008 when 8 women ministers in a Cabinet having 83 Ministers. Again in 2014, 6 Cabinet Ministers and 1 Minister of State were included in the Cabinet having 46 members of the Council of Ministers at the centre. The most shocking is the fact that the members of women in the Council of Ministers at union has never crossed the 4% mark, it means that the 50% of the population have had less than 4% share in power-sharing in the central government.

The scenario is also typical at the state level; there are only a few instances of women holding portfolios of finance, industry etc., which are mainly considered the domain of their male counterparts. The source reveals that the highest percentage of women in the state legislative assemblies has been 10.8% since independence. Haryana has had the highest average of women in the Assembly at 6.1% and Manipur, the lowest at 0.3%. The period average varies between a mere two percent and six percent. Significantly, there seems to be a slight correlation between literacy and female representation. Kerala, with its high literacy rate, has a low state average of 3.6%. Even Rajasthan and Bihar have higher averages at 4.7% and 4.5% respectively.

Since Independence, India has had few women Chief Ministers and 23 women governors. Only one woman so far served as President of India but till date no women could become Vice-President and Chief Justice of India. Only one woman got the opportunity to serve as Chief Election Commissioner and one as
Chairperson of Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) but not as Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India.  

India as country claimed to be a mature democracy and the political participation of women and their engagement in electoral process is an important marker of the maturity and efficiency of democracy in any country. It can be defined not only in terms of the equality and freedom with which they share political power with men, but also in terms of the liberty and space provided for women in the democratic framework of electoral politics. The Constitution of India promulgated in 1952 promised, “To secure to all its citizens justice, social, economic and political” and “equality of status and of opportunity”. Despite the constitutional promulgation, women in the Indian subcontinent continue to be grossly under-represented in the legislatures, both at the national and the state levels.

Women continue to remain invisible and marginalised in decision making bodies, leading to a lack of a feminist perspective in political decision making. It was only with the setting up of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) in September 1974 that the demand for more representation of women in political institutions in India was taken up in a systematic way. Earlier, the focus of the growing women’s movement had been on improving women’s socio-economic position.  

Women Reservation Bill or the constitution 108th Amendment Bill has not only been pending in the Parliament of India for about 20 years. It became a matter of controversy during the elections. Even the approval and due consideration of Standing Committee of Parliament headed by Geeta Mukherji could not convince the members of Parliament for the approval of women reservation bill in parliament, which has never, happened to any other bill. The bill was


introduced in the parliament in 1996, and subsequently in 1999, 2003, 2005 and 2010. It was finally passed by the Rajya Sabha in 2010, but it is still pending in the Lok Sabha and it was lapsed due to the dissolution of the current Lok Sabha.\textsuperscript{56}

The introduction of the bill will increase women’s participation and lead to women’s empowerment. However, the bill has still not been passed. Opposition to the bill includes fears of marginalisation of men by elite women of socially and economically backward classes.\textsuperscript{57}

In the case of representation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, there are few arguments against reservation itself, but rather in the way it is implemented. Some critics suggest that women are mere proxies for men who still make the actual decisions. Despite these concerns, studies from different states have shown that women in panchayats help to address concerns that impact women directly, such as education or those related to public goods like water, especially in areas with higher gender differentials. They also have an empowerment effect such as lesser house-work hours, controls over reproductive choices and an increase in women’s overall participation in politics. However, the move to increase reservation in the Panchayats from 33% to 50% has been regarded as an inadequate compensation for failure to pass the Women’s Reservation Bill.\textsuperscript{58}

The political participation of any group in any country shows the socio-economic and political status of that group in the socio-economic and political


\textsuperscript{57} Rai, n. 54, p.49.

set-up of a country. The marginalised groups have been excluded from political participation throughout the history of mankind; even the historical analysis of the liberal democracy proves that such democracies served the men better than women. The history of political thought including Greece, Rome and Ancient India reveals that public and political domain have always remained the privilege of men and women were excluded from political power.

The development of human civilisation and interaction of the different civilisations during the Renaissance and Industrial revolution in Europe have resulted into new developments in the socio-political and economic set-up of the world and particularly of Europe. The rationality and scientific temper which have been developed during and after the Renaissance in Europe have impacted the people of different countries differently. On the one hand, the development of modern industry and transportation have resulted in the expansion of the European powers as imperial powers and on the other, they added to the poverty, hunger and starvation in the colonies. Simultaneously, they led to development of modern education, transportation and political administration in the colonies.

The interaction of the Indian Civilisation with English Civilisation and the other European civilisations and the establishment of the British rule in India have had the longlasting effects on the socio-political and economic set-up of the Indian society in general and marginalised groups in particular. The colonial initiatives against the evil practices of the Indian society and expansion of modern education to Indian elite had not only impacted the long established Varna system, but it had also helped Indian women by ending the age old social conservatism and evil practices against them.

Indian renaissance and social reforms including the women education have had their own implication not only on Indian women but also on psyche of the Indian people at large. The socio-religious reforms lead by Hindu; Muslim and Sikh institutions have challenged the age old social conservatism and encouraged women education, which led to the development of new thinking.
and the acceptance of the new role of women in the India society. The mass mobilisations against the imperial policies and British rule by Gandhi during the first and second decade of 20th century have also contributed to the politicisation of the Indian women along with the other marginalised groups.

Thus the movement for female suffrage in India in the early 20th century was initiated on the model followed in Britain and the work of British women reformers living in India has also contributed to the political participation of women in colonial India. But eventually the suffrage movement came to terms with nationalist concerns and suffragist ideals had to be justified in Indian terms and linked to the nationalist issues of political rights and colonial status that dominated public discourse in the 1920s and 1930s in India rather than the demand for the political rights of women in India.59 As a result of the movement, limited suffrage rights were extended to women in different provinces of India between 1920 and 1930. However, the suffrage rights granted to a very narrow section of Indian women and it was based on property qualifications.

The Government of India Act 1935 increased women suffrage rights and more women were provided with the right to vote but it was still limited and encumbered by qualifications like literacy, property ownership or marriage to propertied men. The Act enfranchised one woman for every five men enfranchised60. In spite of the opposition to reservation of seats on gender basis, the 1935 Act granted 41 reserved seats for women in the provincial legislatures as well as limited reservation for them in the central legislature, leading to cleavages in the movement on gender and religious lines. However, women took advantage of the seats reserved for them in the elections held in


1937, as 80 women won the elections to become legislators. Thus, India had the third highest number of female legislators in the world in 1937, after the United States and Soviet Union.

The Constitution of Independent India did not reserve seats for women in the legislature. Though reservation of seats for women in the legislature in the waning days of the colonial era was quite short-lived and subdivided on socio-economic, religious and political lines, it gave women a foothold in legislative structure and set a precedent which women could draw on decades later.

Though the foundation for electoral participation of women was laid down during the freedom movement, the post-Independence period did not witness any concerted or united effort to create inclusive electoral spaces for women. By and large, participation after Independence was constrained by social norms shaping not only opportunities but also perceptions of women involvement in politics—perceptions that were sometimes unique to men, at times shared by women.

Overall, the mass participation of women in the political field during the freedom struggle seemed to decline after Independence. Their involvement in politics and electoral competition was confined to familial connections rather than based on interest and societal encouragement to actively participate in politics. Also, political parties that reflected the prevailing societal ethos

---


systematically excluded women from electoral participation. However, as a token of appreciation for their contribution in the struggle for India’s independence, political parties allotted them a few seats in the general elections. This becomes evident from the first Lok Sabha Elections held in 1952 where women could win only 4.4% of the seats in the lower house of Parliament.

The social conservatism of Indian society again forced women to go back to traditional sphere of household and successfully excluded women from political participation and decision making. The five year plans upto 1980’s evaded the development and empowerment of women as an independent issue and merged women’s development with family welfare measures and community development programmes.

Despite the constitutional provisions of guaranteeing equality of sexes, electoral participation of women in terms of legislative or decision-making bodies was quite low and they continue to remain marginalised and under-represented. The demand for greater representation of women in political institutions in India was taken up seriously after the publication of the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) 1976. The CSWI report suggested that female representation in political institutions especially at the grass-roots level needed to be increased through a policy of reservation of seats for women.

In 1988, the National Perspective Plan for Women also suggested that a 30% quota for women should be introduced at all levels of elective bodies.

---


Women’s groups and gender politics strictly insisted that reservation be restricted to the panchayat level to encourage grass-root participation of women in electoral politics.  

The advent of globalisation and India’s commitment to the international framework to enhance political participation could not be fulfilled in the liberalised, privatised and globalised India. Although Indian government took the drastic steps to amend the labour laws and disinvestment from public sector to invite foreign investors, it could not get the approval of the Parliament for 33% reservation in the state legislature and in parliament. The social conservatism and the male domination in political power from bottom to top is yet not ready to accept the 33% share of women in political power, although they constitute 50% of India’s population.

The lukewarm attitude of the national and regional political parties towards women reservation has contributed to their marginalisation from Indian politics. Moreover, the violence and money laundering during the elections have also restrained women’s active participation in politics and the assuming the role of political leadership. As women are living on the socio-economic and political margin of the Indian society, they can’t compete with the established male politicians. The lack of economic resources and muscle power and the conservatism of Indian society do not allow women to perform their proper role in political decision making in India.

However, political parties cannot remain indifferent towards women who constitute 586.5 million population and nearly 48.46% of the electorate (2011 Census). Although almost all parties have attempted to build women organisations to secure their support and make their organisations more broad based, in practice they have fielded much less proportion of women candidates

---

66 Kishwar, n.59, p.2871.
in the elections giving them proportionately much less representation in the legislative bodies than their actual population strength.

Former Chief Election Commission (CEC) M.S. Gill proposed to make it mandatory for all political parties to nominate at least a-third of women candidates for the seats deserves to be commended. If they are not prepared to accept the principle of representation within their own parties, what moral right do they have to advocate reserving parliamentary constituencies for women?  

Increasing women’s political participation and representation in Indian politics requires electoral and parliamentary reforms. While engaging more Indian women voters, the numbers of women contesting elections also need to be increased. For the moment, reservation seems to be the fastest way of increasing the number of women contestants in the elections. Despite the argument that reservation will favour elite women as has happened in Pakistan, the quota system has proven to be the fastest and most effective way of ensuring women’s adequate representation in parliaments all over the world. Women’s Reservation Bill, therefore, is a crucial step towards both electoral and parliamentary reforms.

In addition, the role played by political parties is also very important to ensure that women are adequately represented and policies favouring women are framed. Women groups have suggested for the recent election of Parliament that parties take women’s demands on board in their manifestos and campaigns, endorse women candidates and ensure that they do not give tickets to candidates who have charges of gender-based violence, or have made remarks reflecting gender discrimination. The structure and organisation of political parties must also be considered. Evidence from developed countries, for instance, shows that women party activists, including their networks and links, and gender-related rules are the most important party-level factors affecting women’s Parliamentary representation.

---

67 Fadia, n.3, pp. 547-548.
A few of these suggestions were adopted by political parties in 2014 Parliament elections, it is clear that simultaneous and sustained effort are required for improving the status of women in Parliament. Political parties can ensure a better representation in the Rajya Sabha, which is by nomination. Thus Indian women will have to come out in public places and should voice their right to political participation, overseas help and the global campaign for the political participation of women.