

Women's Political Representation in India: Trends, Challenges and Future Prospects

Abhijith Prasobh

Guest Lecturer

Political Science

St. Thomas College Palai, Mahatma Gandhi University Kottayam, Kerala

Abstract:

One of the most important markers of democratic inclusion is women's political representation, that of constitutional equality and substantive citizenship. India is the largest electoral democracy in the world but women's representation in formal political institutions has been unequal across levels of governance. National level: Women representation has slowly increased in the Lok Sabha from approximately 4-5% in early years after independence to approximately 14-15% in the 17th Lok Sabha. Representation was also not substantial in the Rajya Sabha and state legislative assemblies, and the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution have provided for a more substantial local government that has demonstrated better numbers of its own. This paper explores the trends, challenges and future prospects of the political representation of women in India up to February 2024. It believes that India has come a long way in women's participation in the electoral process, representation at the grassroots level and constitutional reforms, particularly the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, or the Women's Reservation Act. But descriptive representation has not yet completely been realised politically as equal power. Bottlenecks persist, such as legal male dominance norms and poor party nomination systems, limited campaign financing, political violence, proxy representation, intersectional exclusion, and delayed party implementation of legislative quotas. The paper finds that constitutional reservation can make significant contribution towards improving political representation for women in India, if put into practice; internal gender quota in political parties; expand campaign finance of women representatives; capacity building for women representatives; and institutional measures to counter harassment and tokenism.

Keywords: Women's political representation in India, Lok Sabha, Women's Reservation Act, gender quota, Panchayati Raj, political participation.

Introduction

Political representation is not only the right to vote, it is the right to take part in decision making, influence laws, influence public resources, define national priorities. Democracies are supposed to have a legislature that is representative of the people. Women make up almost half of India's population and its electorate, and their representation in Parliament and state assemblies is not commensurate, which poses an important issue of democracy equality. The Indian Constitution ensures equality before the law and bans discrimination based on gender. Political institutions, however, have long been dominated by men, and women have often been able to enter political institutions by means of special personal, familial or party-based routes and not by means of equal political institutional opportunity.

India is a paradox. On the other hand, women's enrolment has been rising significantly and the number of women is a decisive group. As per the electoral roll data of the Election Commission of India (2024), there were 96.88 crore registered electors in the electoral roll data as of February 2024, comprising over 47.15 crore

female electors, giving a gender ratio of 948 women to 1,000 men. Conversely, females continue to be a small percentage of elected members of parliament. Prior to the 2024 general election, women constituted approximately 15% of the Lok Sabha MPs, 13% of the Rajya Sabha MPs and around 9% of state Assembly's MLAs (PRS Legislative Research, 2023a). The mismatch between women voters and women representatives is the crux of the issue discussed in this paper.

This issue came to the fore again in September 2023, with the enactment of the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023 by Parliament. The Act prescribes reservation of about 1/3 of seats for women in Lok Sabha, State legislative assemblies and Legislative Assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi. It also provides for reservation for women in seats reserved for the SC and ST. As per the law, however, the law will take effect after the release of the first census data following the start of the Act and a subsequent delimitation process (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2023). As such, the Act was a historic constitutional undertaking, but not yet a constitutional change.

This research paper explores 3 interrelated questions. Let's start by understanding the key trends in women's political participation in India. Second, what are some persistent barriers to women's equal participation in political institutions? Thirdly, how would you envision the future prospects for improving the representation of women after the constitutional amendment of 2023? The paper suggests that there is some progress being made, but it is not yet enough. While voting participation and local-level reservation have established a base, national and state-level representation remain heavily reliant on party nominations, social acceptance, financial resources, institutional reform.

Methodology

The method of this paper is a qualitative and descriptive research design with secondary data that has been taken until February 2024. The study is based on official electoral statistics, legislative study, constitutional documents, policy reports and scholarly publications. The sources of data are Election Commission of India, PRS Legislative Research, UN Women, Inter-Parliamentary Union, World Economic Forum, research on Panchayati Raj Institutions and gender quotas, and the Gazette of India. The paper does not involve field interviews or primary survey as this is a secondary document. Rather it aggregates and analyzes existing evidence to find patterns and draw conclusions as to the causes of women's under-representation.

National Parliament, state and local self-government assemblies are included in the scope of the paper. The paper also makes a distinction between descriptive representation and substantive representation. Descriptive representation is defined as when women are represented in elected bodies in numbers. Substantive representation is about women representatives who have real influence in policy making, raise gender sensitives and have real power. This is significant because while more women are needed to have a role in politics, increased female political representation alone is not enough to ensure gender-equal governance.

Conceptual Background

There are three key concepts that can be used to explain women's political representation. Formal equality is equality in legal rights, as women and men are given the same vote, the same rights to stand and the same to sit. India as a formal political equality started from the very inception of the republic with the universal adult franchise. In contrast to most western democratic countries, Indian women had not to struggle for the franchise rights after independence. This was an important democratic achievement.

Descriptive representation is the second idea. While women have the legal right to contest, they can still be underrepresented when they are not nominated by political parties, or when voters have gender stereotypes, or when the campaign structure favours male candidates. A woman's place in elected institutions is important because women will not be fully represented if they are not included. Substantive representation is the third idea. Women representatives can highlight issues of health, education, water and sanitation, gender-based

violence, social welfare and livelihoods, among others. Women's participation in local governance has been found to impact on public goods and community priorities in the research literature (Kumar and Ghosh, 2024; UN Women, 2021).

Underrepresentation is one institutional challenge met by gender quotas. Quotas could be used to reserve a seat in the legislature, to mandate a minimum number of women candidates in nominations, or to reserve for women leadership positions. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments brought a significant increase in the number of women in Panchayat Raj Institutions and municipalities in India, by introducing local-level reservation. The Women's Reservation Act 2023 is an extension of the principle of reservation to Lok Sabha and state assemblies, which is yet to be put in practice.

Historical trends in the representation of women.

Women took an active role in the freedom struggle but this did not automatically lead to their equal representation after independence. In the first Lok Sabha, there were just 22 women members, who accounted for 4.4% of the House. Representation was not consistently increasing over the next few decades. In most of the post-Independence years, the percentage of women MPs did not exceed 10 percent. It entered the fold in the Lok Sabha election of 2009 when 59 women were elected, while crossing 10% mark. 62 women have been elected to the 17th Lok Sabha in 2014 and 78 women were elected to the 17th Lok Sabha in 2019, the highest till now (PRS Legislative Research, 2023a).

This is a step forward in terms of absolute numbers, from 22 women MPs in 1952 to 78 in 2019, but is small in relative terms. Women representation in Lok Sabha is approximately 1 in 7 seats even in the 17th Lok Sabha. This is reflected in the overwhelmingly male dominance in the national legislature. The lack of progress indicates that equality of opportunity to political office cannot be achieved through constitutional voting rights.

Table 1-Women's Representation in Selected Lok Sabha Elections

Election year	Women elected	Approximate share of Lok Sabha seats
1952	22	4.4%
1962	34	6.3%
1977	19	3.4%
1984	44	8.1%
1999	49	9.0%
2009	59	10.9%
2014	62	11.4%
2019	78	14.4%

Note. Compiled from historical Lok Sabha/ECI/PRS data available before February 2024.

The representation gap is even larger in state assemblies. At the time of PRS analysis in 2023, states had a total of 12,337 MLAs, with women holding only about 9% of the seats (PRS Legislative Research, 2023a). This is significant because the various spheres of policy including health, education, law and order, agriculture, land, implementation of local government and welfare are under the control of State governments. The absence of women from state legislatures can lead to weak gender representation on issues of everyday life.

Limited inclusion was found in the Rajya Sabha as well. Prior to the 2024 election period, women comprised approximately 13% of the members of the Rajya Sabha (PRS Legislative Research, 2023a). This is also a result of underrepresentation of the Rajya Sabha, which is indirectly elected by members of the state legislatures and thus subject to party choices and male-dominated political networks.

Women in the electoral process as an important democratic change.

One of the most significant developments in Indian politics is the general increase in the number of women who vote. Women have traditionally participated less than men in voting because of social barriers they faced, lower literacy rates, lack of mobility, domestic duties and limited political awareness. After some time, this gap became smaller. By the time of general elections in 2019, women were a prominent part of Indian democracy. In the run-up to the 2024 general elections, the Election Commission of India has reported substantial progress in the voter registration of women, with 47.15 crore women registered as electors in the final electoral roll published in February 2024 (Election Commission of India, 2024).

This trend has changed the behaviour of political parties. There is an increase in the design of welfare schemes, campaign messages and manifestos aimed at women voters by the parties. Partly because women voters are now viewed as a swing vote, issues of cooking gas, housing, sanitation, cash transfers, safety, self-help groups and food security have emerged as political issues. But women's increased involvement in the electoral process has not led to a corresponding increase in the number of women candidates. There is more of a willingness to court women's votes rather than to share the power with women as representatives.

This gap is a significant democratic dilemma. Women mobilised as beneficiaries and voters not proportionately involved as candidates, party leaders, ministers and lawmakers. So, besides turnout, factors such as candidate selection and leadership opportunities must also be considered when evaluating women's electoral participation.

Nominating of candidates and party gatekeeping.

Political parties are the main gatekeepers of legislative representation. In a first-past-the-post system, as is in place in India, the party's nomination, party organisation, local connections and money-power play a key role in a candidate's victory. Women's representation will be limited even if large numbers of women vote if the major parties provide few women candidates.

The Lok Sabha elections in 2019 are a case in point. Only a small proportion of women were elected, though 78 women were elected. As per Association for Democratic Reforms (2019), 724 women candidates contested Lok Sabha elections 2019 and 716 affidavits were analysed. Women candidates continued to be a minority (less than 10%) of all candidates in percentage terms. This points to the fact that the issue is not only voters' unwillingness but also the restricted opportunities that come from party selection processes.

Some political parties like BJD and TMC have a much higher percentage of women MPs as compared to others (PRS Legislative Research, 2023a), among parties with more than 10 seats in the Lok Sabha. This indicates that women are winning where they are nominated in viable constituencies. Thus, the often-used phrase "women are less 'winnable'" is weak. Low nomination, unequal access to resources and male-dominated party structures are more accurate explanations of women's low representation.

Women are frequently nominated in areas where they have inherited networks or in those areas where women have political families. For some women, dynastic entry can help remove impediments, but does not open the door to representation for common women, particularly women from marginalised caste, class, tribal, minority and rural communities. Women's political participation may only be confined to certain elite routes if there are no internal party reforms.

Local Governance and Panchayati Raj: A stronger model of inclusion

The most important achievement in the representation of women in India is at the local level. Panchayati Raj Institutions' set up under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in these bodies. Many states later, the percentage of reservation for women in local bodies has been raised to 50%. This has made India also have one of the highest numbers of elected women representatives globally. Kumar and Ghosh (2024) found that over 1.45 million women in India were involved in local decision-making

positions, with a proportion of approximately 44.4% of elected local government representatives being women.

Representation at the local level has had a number of positive impacts. It has mainstreamed women's presence in public office, provided leadership experience for rural women and introduced women's issues in local governance. Women representatives have been involved in water supply, sanitation, school access, health services, nutrition, domestic violence and livelihood programmes etc. The local level has also developed a pool of women leaders who could potentially become state or national politicians.

But there are also challenges for local representation. An informal exercise of power by husbands or male relatives of elected women is sometimes termed as proxy representation or “sarpanch pati”. This problem is not a failure of the reservation, but what it does do is to demonstrate that numerical representation, without training, without legal protections, without administrative respect, without social change, cannot be expected to succeed. Kumar and Ghosh (2024) state that the roles of women representatives are often underestimated and that these women should be given institutional support to empower them to have an independent authority.

Table 2- Women’s Political Representation by Level of Governance Before February 2024

Level of governance	Status of women’s representation	Interpretation
Lok Sabha	About 15% women MPs	Highest historical level by 2019, but still far below parity
Rajya Sabha	About 13% women MPs	Indirect election has not ensured gender balance
State assemblies	About 9% women MLAs	Deep underrepresentation at state level
Panchayati Raj/local bodies	Around 44–46% women representatives in many estimates	Strongest inclusion due to reservation
Women voters	47.15 crore female electors in Feb. 2024 roll	Women are a major electoral force

Note. Compiled from ECI, PRS and ORF data available before February 2024.

The Women’s Reservation Act, 2023

The most significant development in the field of women's political representation in India in recent times is the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023. It mandates reserved seats for women in Lok Sabha, state legislatures and the Delhi Legislative Assembly, which are about a third of the overall seats. It also integrates women from the reserved SC/ST seats (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2023), which are reserved for Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes.

The Act is historic since for decades, there had been deliberations on the necessity for women's reservation in Parliament and state assemblies. Prior legislation was proposed in 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2008, but it never passed. The bill passed the Rajya Sabha in 2008 and failed to pass after the dissolution of the 15th Lok Sabha in 2010 (PRS Legislative Research, 2023b). So the passing of the 2023 Act was a significant progress made. The Act also has an important restriction: the implementation is tied to the first census after the commencement of the Act and the subsequent delimitation. This implies that the reservation was not to be applied immediately in February 2024. Critics say this leaves people in limbo and in wait-and-see mode. Proponents of delimitation say it is needed to clearly define reserved constituencies. The future effect of the Act will depend on the time of the census and delimitation, the way in which seats are rotated and the preparation of women leaders prior to the application of the quota.

Women's Political Representation: Challenges to Women's Political Representation

Patriarchal social norms

Patriarchy is a major obstacle preventing women from taking part in politics. Politics remains considered the preserve of males, who are expected to speak in public, travel, negotiate, confront and mobilise finances. Women are likely to be expected to prioritise household duties over care-giving. These expectations reduce their time, mobility and confidence to engage in politics. Questions of family honour, safety, “suitability” for public life may arise even in the context of women contesting elections.

Weak party support

Women empowerment is frequently mentioned by political parties but few women candidates are nominated by political parties. Local power players, caste considerations, money, loyalty and perceived winnability also play a role in candidate selection. Women who want to run for office may face difficulties in accessing party leadership networks in which tickets are allocated, as these tend to be male-dominated. Women's representation relies on party self-selection unless there are party internal democracies or quotas for women.

Campaign finance constraints

Political elections in India need a lot of money. All candidates are required to budget for travel, workers, publicity, social outreach and constituency management. Women tend to have less control over family property, networks of businesses, and donor networks. This financial disadvantage renders parties less likely to think of them as competitive. Thus, there is a need for campaign finance reform, transparent funding and targeted support for women candidates.

Violence, harassment and online abuse

Women in politics are subjected to gender-based intimidation like character assassination, sexist comments, threats, trolling and physical insecurity. Online platforms have opened up new avenues of political communication and new ways of political abuse. Reputational damage can be a deterrent for women to enter politics, particularly younger women and those without strong family support. Complaint systems and party discipline and law enforcement should be enhanced.

Representativeness and tokenism

Proxy control by male relatives, at the local level, has sometimes undermined women's reservation. At higher levels, women can be represented symbolically, but without any actual decision-making powers. Tokenism is when female individuals are seen in public events but not in the selection committees, finance committees, strategy groups or cabinet portfolios. Representation should not be judged solely on the number of seats held, but also on influence as well.

Intersectional exclusion

Women are not all the same. Political opportunity is influenced by caste, class, religion, tribe, region, disability, age and education. Elite women have greater access to politics than Dalit and Adivasi women, Muslim women, working class or rural women. The Women Reservation Act only includes SC/ST reserved seats and has no separate provisions for inclusion of OBC women or minority women. Reforming the future should have to consider intersectionality, to ensure that representation does not benefit only already privileged women.

Table 3- Challenges and Recommended Responses

Challenge	Effect on representation	Suggested response
Low party nominations	Fewer women candidates in winnable seats	Party-level candidate quotas and transparent ticket distribution
Campaign finance barriers	Women struggle to compete electorally	Public funding support and spending transparency

Patriarchal norms	Politics seen as unsuitable for women	Civic education and gender-sensitisation campaigns
Violence and harassment	Women discouraged from public life	Strong legal remedies, fast complaints and party sanctions
Proxy representation	Women elected but men exercise power	Training, monitoring and legal recognition of women's authority
Delayed quota implementation	Constitutional promise not immediately realised	Time-bound census, delimitation and implementation roadmap

Graph 2: Representation Gap Across Governance Levels

A second graph may be inserted in the final paper or presentation using the following data:

Governance level	Women's representation before Feb. 2024
Local government/Panchayati Raj	44.4%
Lok Sabha	15%
Rajya Sabha	13%
State assemblies	9%

Interpretation: There is an “inverted pyramid” of representation in the data. Women's representation is high at the grassroots level (where reservation exists), and low in the state and national legislatures (where there is party control of candidate selection).

Future Prospects

The recent constitutional advances in women's representation in India's political sphere are subject to a question: whether the promise of the Constitution will be realised in practice. The Women's Reservation Act can change the nature of legislatures. This means that there will be a significant number of women lawmakers in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies if one-third reservation is implemented. This may normalize women's leadership and have a lasting impact on party recruitment, policy-making, and expectations.

But simply reserving won't fix all the issues. Parties are still attempting to regulate the selection of female politicians. If candidate selection continues to be closed, and if the seats are distributed evenly, then many reserved seats may be filled by elite families. The change in reserved constituencies can create uncertainty for the male and female politicians. PRS Legislative Research (2023b) pointed out that after delimitation, rotation might impact the incentives for constituency work as representatives will not be certain whether they could contest from the same seat. So, the design of implementation is important.

The five reforms should be included in a strong future strategy. First, the government should offer a definite plan of action for the 2023 Act, for example the census, delimitation and rotation process. Secondly, before the introduction of legal reservation, political parties should increase their women's tickets voluntarily. Delaying change with the waiting for the quota. Third, train women candidates in the skills of law making, budgeting, public speaking, media handling, digital campaigning and constituency campaigning. Fourth, campaign financing systems should be propped up by supporting first time women candidates particularly from marginalised communities. Finally, legislatures must establish gender-responsive work cultures such as safe shelter, child care facilities, anti-harassment procedures and respectful parliamentary behaviour.

The number of women voters also opens new opportunities for the future. With women becoming more politically assertive, there may be pressure on parties to nominate more women and to tackle gender specific policy needs. The recruitment networks for higher politics could be established through the activities of self-help groups, women's collectives, civil society organisations and local women representatives. The Panchayat

Raj Institutions should be considered to be leadership institutes for state and national politics. Strengthen the support available for women who have previously served as sarpanch, panchayat member, municipal councillor and/or local committee leader to take on assembly and parliamentary elections.

Future prospects will also be influenced by education and media representation. Imagining politics as a career becomes possible when girls and young women are seen as chief ministers, MPs, ministers, speakers, party presidents and leaders in their local communities. Media should not portray the woman politicians as merely an image, as a family member or personal life. Rather, attention should be paid to their policy activity, public responsibility and leadership.

Discussion

In India, the experience has proven that redesigning institutions is crucial for enhancing women's political representation. Local level: reservation resulted in a significant rise in the number of women representatives. Representation in the national and state level was low with the absence of representation at these levels prior to 2023. This comparison indicates that the individual cannot count on slow changes in society and party goodwill alone.

Representation simultaneously needs to be substantive. Legislatures can be gender-balanced and still perpetuate gender inequality by failing to give women an opportunity to voice opinions in their party or by excluding them from the top positions in government or forcing them to conform to male family networks. Thus, a descriptive representation must link to substantive power. Women should not just be represented in legislative bodies, but they should also be able to influence and shape debates, chair committees, influence budgets and draft laws and represent women of diverse interests.

The Indian example also indicates that the political empowerment of women is not progressive. There is high participation of women and representation at the local level, while at the state and national level the representation is still low. There have been significant women leaders in the country—prime ministers, chief ministers, speaker and party leaders—but this has failed to challenge structural exclusion. High symbolic leadership at the top and low representation across institutions are compatible. Hence the emphasis needs to be on the inclusion of common women in a systematic manner rather than exceptional women leaders.

Conclusion

There has been a modest and uneven improvement in the representation of women in politics in India. By February 2024, women were an important electoral constituency, as the number of female voters registered and their participation increased considerably. Women had also done well in the field of local governance because of constitutional reservation. But the number of women in the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha and state assemblies was still low. In 2023, the Women's Reservation Act was enacted for the first time to redress the balance, by providing a third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies to women. However, that has not happened yet and the promise of equal representation remains subject to future census, delimitation and political will.

The problem is not women's ability. When given opportunities, women have cast their votes, served on local leadership and governance, and led movements, as well as running for elected positions and getting elected. The issue is more than just patriarchy, party gatekeeping, campaign finance restrictions, violence, and tokenism and institutional delay. India's democratic future will be reinforced if women are not just seen as voters and beneficiaries of welfare but as par with men as law makers and decision makers. There will be a need to implement the reservation scheme in time, internal reforms in political parties, support for women candidates, protection from harassment and leadership pipelines from local bodies to Parliament in order to achieve this. It is not a favour to the women that women are represented, it's a democratic justice.

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