Breaking the Barriers: A Critical Reflection of Presence of Women in the Indian Elite Institutions

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Abstract; For a democracy to function effectively, it must embody democratic values like liberty, equality, justice and fraternity. Without these, democratic mechanisms become hollow, especially when elite institutions fail to reflect diversity. This paper examines if women, as a distinct social class have substantive representation in elite Indian institutions, that is Higher Education Institutions, Judiciary, Indian Administrative Services and Parliament. While democracy promises equal representation and inclusion, the data reveals that Indian institutions fail to reflect the diversity of the nation, with women occupying only marginal positions, particularly at senior levels. Employing intersectional theory, this study analyzes the intersection of gender with socio-economic, caste, and political networks, examining how familial ties and elite backgrounds often dictate access to power, limiting the representational scope to privileged perspectives. This paper calls for a transformative approach to inclusivity to ensure genuine representation extends beyond token presence, enabling meaningful participation from diverse backgrounds to create an effective democratic process that truly reflects India's social fabric.

Keywords: substantive representation, democracy, inclusion, gender justice, inequality.

Introduction

Democracy is a system in which each individual's voice matters and all have an equal role in shaping governance and society. It is not merely a system of governance but a way of life, grounded in rights and discussion, respect for one another, and common values (Rodrigues, 2011:153). It is celebrated as the "highest form of governance or form of institutional management" (Anand, 2022:1), but it

relies not solely on institutional frameworks or elections but on the foundational values of liberty, equality, justice and fraternity (Rodrigues, 2002). While elections are a necessary component, they are merely one facet of a broader democratic framework. Democracy's legitimacy stems from its institutions—legislature, judiciary, and public administration—which must reflect the nation's diversity and uphold these values. Without inclusive, representative institutions, a democracy cannot be genuinely called democratic, as the goal is not just participation but meaningful inclusion. Additionally, justice has a very significant link with democracy, as it is a form of 'associated life, grounded on rights and deliberation, mutual respect and the shared ways of life' (Rodrigues, 2011:153), implying it is not a form of government but rather a form of society (Rodrigues, 2002:123).

Political rights and civil liberties, the defining dimensions of democracy (Dahl 1971), have had different effects on the political representation of women (Paxton et al., 2010, p. 5). True representation in a democracy goes beyond symbolic numbers or mere presence. A genuinely democratic institution includes voices from all social backgrounds, genders, and classes in decision-making processes, actively incorporating the perspectives of diverse populations (Sen, 2001). A democracy where half the population—women, for instance—is underrepresented in leadership roles fails to meet the democratic ideal of equality and inclusion.

The glaring underrepresentation of women in positions of power raises compels a critical examination: Is Indian democracy truly inclusive? How does it effectively incorporate women as a social group in democratic processes and its outcomes? Is this underrepresentation due to systemic barriers? Do institutions reflect inherent biases that favor dominant groups, or are they structured to exclude marginalized communities like women? Such questions are integral to assessing a democracy's inclusivity and determining whether democracy in India truly serves all citizens including women. With this background, this paper aims to examine the presence of women in elite institutions in India, such as Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Judiciary, Indian Administrative Services and Parliament, to critically evaluate their status inclusion as well as numerical strength in reaping the benefits of a democratic society.

Historical Background and Intersectionality

Democracy was initially a system where the "people have all authority" (Furetière, 1690) but it centered on a narrow, privileged segment of the population, excluding significant groups, particularly women, people of lower socio-economic status, and racial minorities. Clark (1939) was the first to pose the idea that "that economic development is a universal process, applicable to all peoples, not just a privilege of the 'civilized' nations" (Przeworski, 2008: 57). As democracies evolved, social movements exposed various inadequacies of representation, which ignore the unique challenges of the marginalised. Today, democratic regimes are facing the challenge of inclusion (Palacios, 2016), where effective democracy demands practices "rooted in values of fairness and justice, fostering a system that represents society's full diversity, across gender, class, race, and identity" (Sen, 2011: 7).

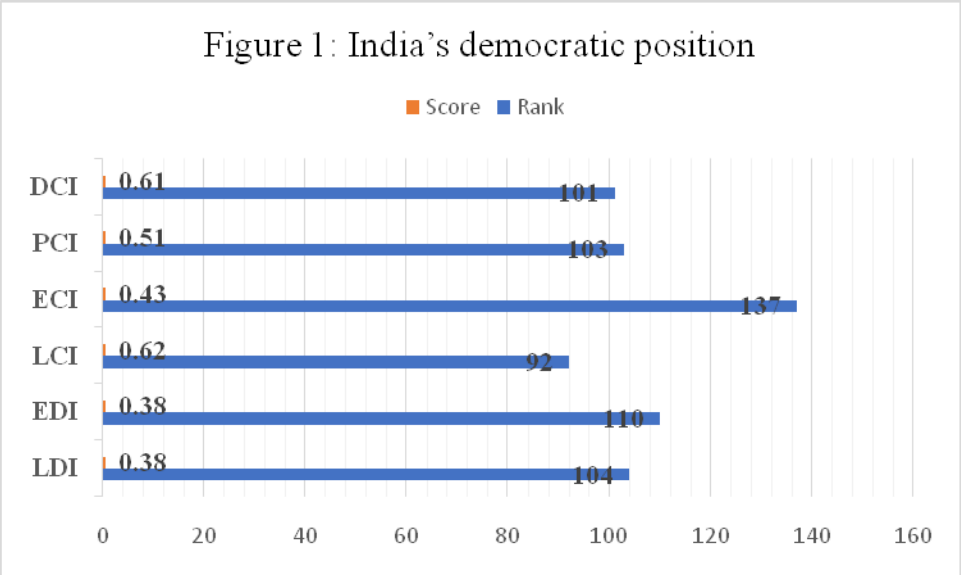
Crenshaw's (2013) concept of intersectionality offers a framework for inclusion, recognizing that overlapping identities shape various experiences of privilege and oppression. Thus, rather than viewing marginalized groups as homogenous, intersectionality emphasizes that democratic processes must support equitable representation that reflects the unique realities of each group.In political and institutional contexts, intersectionality rejects "neutral" representation, urging institutions to enable meaningful participation that respects diverse experiences. By facilitating policies responsive to society's needs, intersectional representation strengthens democracy's core. Without it, institutions risk entrenching superficial representation and ignoring the inequities that hinder democratic engagement. This intersectional framework invites us to consider whether those who occupy positions of power truly represent the interests of the broader population. As data in the next section will reveal, structural, cultural, and socio-economic factors reinforce existing barriers to gender equality in leadership (Tremblay, 2007), highlighting the need to dismantle these biases to create an inclusive democracy.

Social Reality of Women in Indian Elite Institutions

The Democracy Report 2024's scores for India across multiple democratic indices indicate significant challenges in achieving a balanced, inclusive democracy that fulfills both the electoral and liberal dimensions as outlined by Robert Dahl's principles of "polyarchy", as shown in Figure 1. The Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) score of 0.38 places India low on the scale, revealing fundamental weaknesses in both electoral quality and the liberal democratic

principles. India is struggling to meet essential electoral standards such as fair elections, freedom of expression, median independence etc., as showcased by Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) of 0.38, which are the key components of a robust and functional democracy. While Liberal Component Index (LCI) is a little higher at 0.62, suggesting moderate protection of civil liberties and rule of law, the Egalitarian Component Index (ECI) score of 0.43 reveals significant inequalities in political participation, suggesting systemic barriers that prevent equal representation of all social groups. Additionally, Participatory Component Index (PCI) score of 0.51 shows a constrained citizen participation beyond elections, such as civil society organisations and local governments. Lastly, the Deliberative Component Index (DCI) score of 0.61 reflects a partial commitment to reasoned, inclusive public debate and decision-making, with room for improvement in respectful consultation and consideration of diverse perspectives. Altogether, these indices suggest that India's democracy, while maintaining basic democratic structures, struggles to uphold an equitable and inclusive democratic system where all citizens actively participate in and influence governance.

Figure 1: India's democratic position



Source: Author's compilation from Nord, M., Lundstedt, M., Angiolillo, F., Borella, C., Gastaldi, L., Good God, A., Natsika, N., & Lindberg, S. I. (2024). *Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot: Democracy Report 2024*. V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.

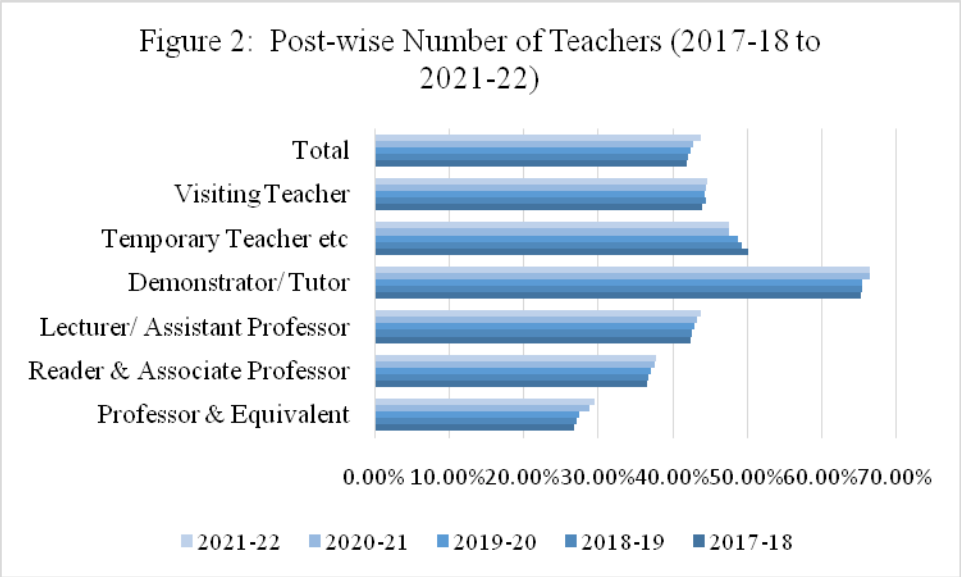
India ranks 129thout of 146 countries, according to the gender gap report 2024, with a gender parity score of 0.641 with marked disparities in Economic Participation and Opportunity (142nd, 0.398) and Health and Survival (142nd, 0.951) (WEF, 2024). Despite marginal gains, India's Economic Participation score has declined by 6.2% from 2012, reflecting entrenched challenges in female workforce participation (134th, 0.459), wage equality (120th, 0.521), and estimated earned income (135th, 0.286). Only 1.8% of Indian firms have female majority ownership, and women hold top managerial roles in just 6.8% of companies, illustrating structural barriers in female leadership (WEF, 2024). While the rate of female labor force participation remains low, 92% of women work in the informal sector compared to 87% of men, highlighting a reliance on informal work lacking benefits or job security. A stark gender disparity exists in part-time employment, with 45.94% of women working part-time against 13.89% of men, likely due to care giving expectations (WEF, 2024). India ranks 65th in Political Empowerment (0.251), with significant underrepresentation in federal government (17.2% of parliamentarians and 6.9% of ministers are women), underscoring persistent social biases against female political engagement.

Table 1: Post-wise Number of Male & Female Teachers (2021-22)

Post	Total	Male	Female	% Female
Professor & Equivalent	95050	66507	28543	30.03
Reader & Associate Professor	121269	73695	47574	39.23
Lecturer/ Assistant Professor	829981	456334	373647	45.02
Demonstrator/ Tutor	53191	18546	34645	65.13

Temporary Teacher etc	74784	38466	36318	48.56
Visiting Teacher	8649	4597	4052	46.85
Grand Total	1182924	658145	524779	44.36

Source: Author's compilation using Government of India. (2023). *All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-2022*. Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education.



Source: Author's compilation using Government of India. (2023). *All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-2022*. Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education.

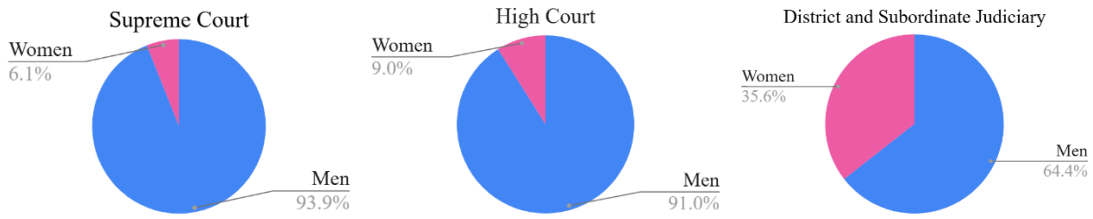
The data on faculty distribution and university types in India, as well as on the gender breakdown across academic positions from 2017 to 2022 as shown in Table 1 and Figure 2, underscores significant gender and structural imbalances within India's higher education sector. Among the total of 1,168 universities, only 17 are designated as women-only institutions, reflecting minimal institutional support for women's exclusive educational spaces, especially compared to the substantial numbers of government and private institutions (240 central and 473 private universities, respectively).

Women comprise 43.4% of the teaching workforce, but this representation diminishes considerably at senior academic levels, indicating a critical imbalance. At the Professor rank, women account for only 30.03%, and their presence marginally improves to 39.23% at the Reader/Associate Professor level. The majority of women faculty are concentrated in lower or temporary positions: they represent 65.13% of Demonstrator/Tutor roles, while holding 47.7% and 44.7% of Temporary Teacher and Visiting Teacher positions, respectively. This distribution suggests that women often enter academia in entry-level or less secure roles but encounter substantial obstacles when advancing to more influential positions.

While there has been an incremental growth in women's representation over the last five years, data showcases that progress towards reaching senior roles in elite spaces have been limited. Women held 29.5% professor roles in 2021-22 as opposed to 26.9% in 2017-18 while associate professor roles have increased to 37.8% to 36.6%, suggesting systemic barriers within academic institutions which restrict upward mobility of women and limiting their access to leadership and decision-making roles. This 'glass ceiling' (Cotter et al., 2001) not only constrains career progression but underscores a lack of effective policies aimed at fostering gender diversity within senior academic ranks.

The uneven gender representation at senior levels and entry level positions raises significant concerns regarding structural support for career advancement of women. While institutions allow entry at initial positions, they fail to sustain their growth in higher roles, which results in a creation and perpetuation of a pattern where women hold roles with less power and fewer advancement prospects, culminating into limited influence in academic sphere. This leadership imbalance but also diminishes the diversity of perspectives that are crucial for a truly inclusive academic environment, suggesting an urgent need for comprehensive policy changes to not only dismantle barriers and but also promote gender equality at the top levels of academia.

Figure 3: Working Strength of Women Judicial Officers in Supreme Court (as on 08.11.2024), High Courts (as on 05.12.2022), and District and Subordinate Judiciary (as on 05.12.2022)



Source: Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 2116, dated on 29.07.2022.

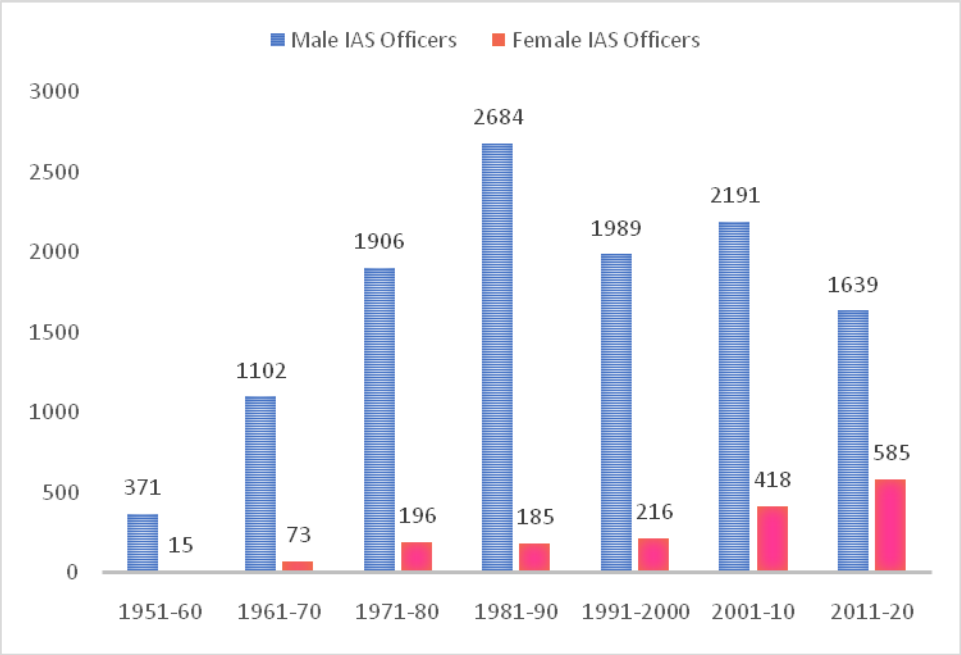
The judiciary is a cornerstone of democracy, responsible for upholding the rule of law and ensuring justice for all citizens, regardless of class, caste, or gender. In a diverse country like India, where various social and economic backgrounds coexist, it is essential that the judiciary not only represents but also reflects this diversity. For a judicial system to function justly, it must include voices and perspectives from all segments of society, especially marginalized communities. This inclusion ensures that the judiciary is able to empathise and understand the unique challenges faced by the diverse population of India. Additionally, a diverse and truly representative judiciary contributes not only to a fairer but also a more balanced interpretation of law, thus ensuring that the rights and needs of all citizens are equitably addressed.

However, the representation of women in the judiciary, particularly at the higher echelons, shows a significant gender disparity, as shown in Figure 3. For instance, women make up only 6.06% of Supreme Court judges. The present two female judges of Supreme Court both belong to influential judicial families, suggesting not only a specific socio-economic background but also a network and legacy which is far from that of an average Indian woman. While their achievements are notable, their privileged backgrounds raise a significant question- Are they representing women as a class or are they a representative of their social class? This leads us to a significant intersectional component. Undoubtedly, having women on the bench of Supreme Court is a step towards gender inclusion, but the intersection of gender with class and caste must be considered to truly gauge the inclusion. For example, if the few women to ascend to the highest level of judiciary in the nation predominantly belong to elite privileged backgrounds, then their representation is limited to a narrow segment of the society. Therefore, while the presence of women is crucial, true inclusivity requires representation spanning across all socio-economic identities.

Furthermore, only 9% judges are women in High Court, reflecting a troubling pattern. High Courts serve not only as an appellate body but also as institutions critical for interpretations of constitutional matters and precedents, thus shaping judicial landscape. This lack of representation of women suggests a limited capacity of the court to render justice in gender specific issues, especially in cases where an insight into gender dynamics may lead to more equitable decisions or a nuanced understanding across diverse social divides. Additionally, as High Court serves a pathway to Supreme Court, thus a lack of inclusion here will perpetuate gender imbalance apex judicial body. Lastly, at the district and subordinate judiciary levels, women constitute a measly 35.6%. While this reflects a comparatively higher representation, it is far from parity. Lower courts handle cases which affect daily lives of people, thus having a female judge can bring valuable perspectives that foster empathy and fair outcomes, especially in cases that directly impact women and vulnerable groups.

The decline of women's representation district courts to High Courts and ultimately the Supreme Court highlights a systemic issue in career advancement of female judges, suggesting that structural and cultural barriers hinder their promotion. This lack of upward mobility indicates that while women somewhat manage to join the workforce at the lower level, their opportunities to ascend to positions of a greater influence are limited, which ultimately reinforces male dominance in judicial decision-making. The data also showcases the lack of inclusion and fairness in judiciary as an institution. Without any significant representation from women across all levels, the judiciary risks becoming detached from the experiences of half of the population. Further, when women who do ascend to higher positions come from privileged backgrounds, as seen in the Supreme Court, their ability to represent women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds is compromised. A judiciary that fails to be inclusive risks losing its legitimacy and the public confidence, as it may seem disconnected from the realities of those who it is meant to serve in a democratic society.

Figure 4: Gender-wise appointment of IAS Officers (1951-2020)

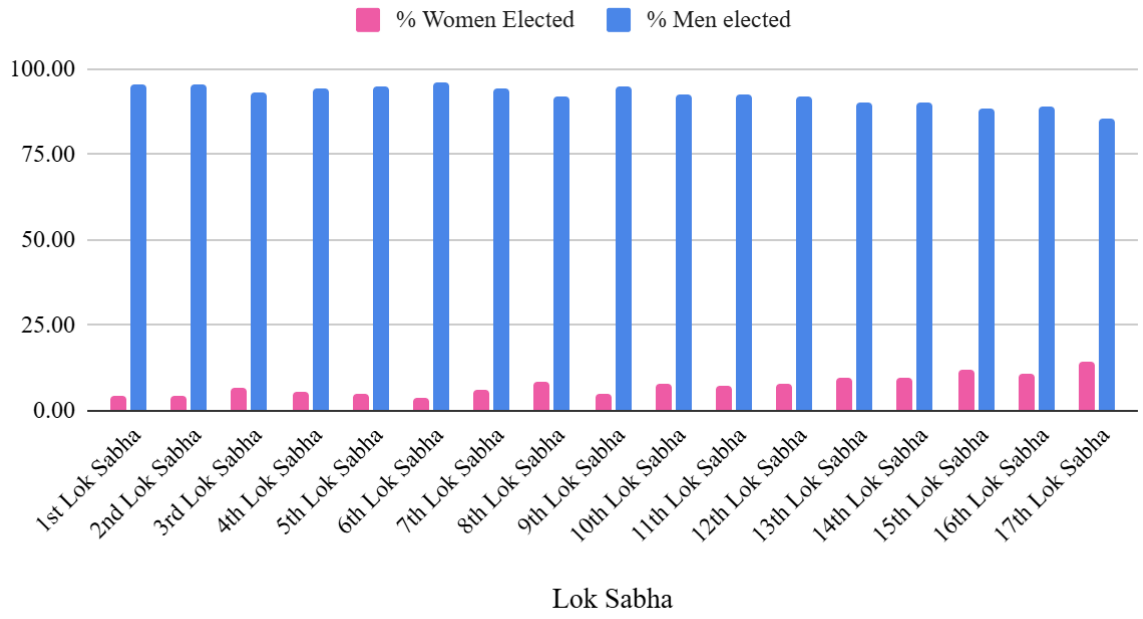


Source: TCPD Indian Administrative Service Officers Dataset (TCPD-IAS), 1951-2020, 2021 Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University.

There has been a slow increase of women's representation in the Indian Administrative Service from 1951 to 2020 as shown in Figure 4, from just 3.89% in the 1950s to 26.3% by the 2010s. But despite this rise, women's representation is significantly limited in a critical elite institution which is tasked with the implementation of policies and maintenance of democratic governance. The low percentage of women in the initial years shows the entrenched gender biases and systemic barriers which restricted access to influential roles. Despite recent increases, the data likely reflects the inclusion of women primarily from privileged backgrounds, suggesting that many Indian women—especially those from marginalized and rural communities—remain underrepresented. This exclusion raises concerns about the equitable functioning of democratic institution which ought to represent the diverse population it serves. When women, particularly those from diverse socio-economic, caste, and regional backgrounds, are excluded from high-level decision-making, policies may inadvertently ignore or misunderstand the unique challenges faced by these groups. Such a lack of diversity restricts the IAS's ability to foster social justice and develop truly inclusive policies, potentially perpetuating inequities. To achieve genuine democratic governance and social justice, it is essential that the IAS becomes

representative of India's diversity, enabling a more just and balanced administration that addresses the needs of all segments of society.

Figure 5: MPs elected in Lok Sabha (1951-2020), Gender-wise



Source: Authors compilations from Hussain, S. (2022). *The Impact of Women Representatives on Public Policy A Study of Indian Parliament 2009-2019* [Jamia Milia Islamia University].

Women's access to legislative arenas may be grouped in three broad categories i.e., political, socio-economic and cultural. These factors work altogether to shape and create "create a dynamic that acts as a global incubator for the election of women" (Tremblay, 2007: 535). The representation of women in the Lok Sabha from 1951 to 2023 reflects a slow, inconsistent progression in women's inclusion within one of India's most pivotal democratic institutions, as shown by Figure 5. Women's representation has shown slow, uneven progress, beginning with just 4.42% in the 1st Lok Sabha (1952) and barely exceeding 10% until the 15th Lok Sabha in 2009. This gradual increase—culminating at 14.36% in the 17th Lok Sabha (2019)—reflects shifts in social attitudes, but the slight decline to 13.62% in the 18th Lok Sabha (2023) suggests that this growth is neither stable nor deeply embedded. The data suggests that institutional and societal barriers,

such as patriarchal norms and systemic biases, still hinder women's full access to political power, limiting genuine progress toward gender parity in Indian politics.

The proportion of women in the Lok Sabha has increased, but the studies (Hussain, 2022) show that many elected women rely heavily on familial or political connections. In Phase 1 (1952-1971), 45% of women elected to Parliament came from political families, a trend that persisted in Phase 2 (1972-1988) at 48%, and Phase 3 (1989-2009) at 45%. Even in Phase 4 (2010-2019), where 58% of women were elected without political lineage, the remaining 42% retained ties to influential political families. The reliance on political connections suggests that entry into Parliament for women has historically been shaped by gate keeping, with families acting as conduits to political careers rather than a system which promotes equal opportunity based on individual merits. Thus, though the quantity of women in Parliament may have increased, the quality of representation remains insufficient in terms of diversity. Additionally, the data implies that women with political connections tend to primarily represent the interests and perspectives of their political families or affiliations instead of the broader interests of women across different socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, political lineage often entails obligations to uphold the legacies, alliances, and policy preferences of their families or political mentors. Consequently, such women may prioritize party and familial loyalty over advocating for issues affecting ordinary women, such as healthcare, education, and gender equality. While they may identify with women's issues in general, their class and status often place them in a position removed from the realities faced by the majority of Indian women, particularly those from marginalized communities.

While the decreasing trend in lineage-dependence from 48% in Phase 2 to 42% in Phase 4 is a promising shift towards a more independent representation, 42% is a significant portion, underscoring a systemic bias that privileges women from elite backgrounds and limits the scope of their representation. Political parties, too, contribute to this bias by preferring candidates with established family names, valuing the "recognition factor" over genuine grassroots support. As a result, these women may be less inclined or even restricted from addressing the broader and intersectional issues that affect women as a diverse class in India.

The representation of women in the Lok Sabha is insufficient in the sense that it is not fully reflective of the diversity of Indian women. Although the number of women in Parliament has grown, the high percentage of women with political lineage questions whether these representatives genuinely reflect the perspectives of women as a collective class or are limited by their ties to political dynasties. True representation should allow women from varied backgrounds—rural, urban, marginalized, and economically disadvantaged—to have equal opportunities for political participation. Only then can women's representation in Parliament evolve to be both numerically and qualitatively sufficient, serving the interests of all women in India rather than just the politically connected few.

Way Forward: Toward Inclusive Representation of women in Democracy

True inclusion of all group/class of society in a democracy requires dismantling systemic barriers that restrict marginalized groups from meaningful participation. Justice within democratic institutions cannot rely solely on universal principles or token representation; it must address distinct social and structural disadvantages, such as those faced by women and economically disadvantaged groups, that hinder full and equitable engagement (Young, 1990). Institutions may appear democratic by electoral results or diversity statistics, but without mechanisms to counter deep-rooted inequalities, democracy serves dominant groups rather than the wider citizenry.

Inclusive representation acknowledges "group difference" (Young, 2000), recognizing that society's diverse social and economic backgrounds lead to unique needs and challenges. Women in power, particularly those from privileged backgrounds, often represent the interests of their class more than those of all women, leading to a narrow representation that overlooks diverse social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Thus, true democracy requires intersectional representation, where leaders from varied backgrounds can address barriers across caste, creed, and class. Moreover, democratic institutions must foster environments for full, meaningful participation, ensuring that policy formation reflects the voices of all communities. Lacking such inclusive dialogue, democracy risks producing policies that prioritize dominant group interests while ignoring the marginalized. Structural and cultural biases limit advancement, especially for women, and even

positive shifts in education and professional achievement cannot, on their own, yield inclusive leadership.

Systemic oppression, deeply embedded in institutional practices, explains why democratic institutions often fall short of inclusivity. Cultural and institutional biases in candidate selection favor specific candidates while systematically excluding others, limiting opportunities for marginalized individuals (Tremblay, 2007). Thus, achieving democratic justice requires not only diverse representation but also the resources and freedoms for all citizens to participate actively in governance. The way forward demands more than increasing diversity within institutions; it requires transformative change that dismantles structural inequalities and embeds the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity across all levels. Real democratic inclusion occurs when institutions become accountable to the people they serve, embracing these values in both structure and practice.

Therefore, there is a need of transformative changes to address the systemic barriers which limit women's representation in India's elite institutions. These barriers tend to stem from the entrenches structural biases and cultural norms which hinder their effective participation in governance and leadership. Actualisation of genuine representation necessitates implementation of institutional mechanisms such as gender quotas, equitable candidate selection processes and support mechanisms. While a bill for increased representation of women has passed in the parliament, only time will tell how it fares. However, these mechanisms alone cannot bring about a truly transformative change. Fostering a societal mindset that recognizes women as equals to men will ensure that structural reforms are enacted in both letter and spirit. Only by the dismantling of these barriers can democratic institutions truly reflect the values of democracy in society, thus creating inclusive spaces for all citizens.

Conclusion

The analysis of women's presence within India's elite institutions—namely Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Judiciary, Indian Administrative Services and Parliament—underscores a persistent and systemic failure to realize democratic ideals of inclusivity, equality, and genuine representation. Despite the incremental gains in the number of women occupying formal roles in these elite institutions, data reveals a troubling trend: women are underrepresented, especially

at higher positions of power and leadership. For example, in Lok Sabha women's representation has only reached 14.36% in the 17th Lok Sabha, despite comprising nearly half the population in electorates. Similarly, in academia, a miniscule 30% of professorial positions are held by women, which is a stark contrast to their greater presence in lower-tier roles such as Demonstrator/Tutor. Within the judiciary, there is critical lack of representation at senior judicial roles, only 9% in High Court and 6.06% in Supreme Court, which further showcases the institutionalized barriers to equitable representation. Through critical examination, it becomes evident that the lack of representation of women and inclusion are not only because of social and cultural biases but from structural and institutional biases embedded within democratic frameworks, which showcases that democratic institutions must be followed not only in letter but in spirit.

Additionally, a significant question about the women in positions of power is raise- do these women truly represent women as a class? The data analysed suggests otherwise. Policies which favor politically connected candidates, limited support for women in advancing of their careers, and cultural biases within candidate selection processes all collectively reinforce these patterns, thus sidelining marginalized voices from decision-making processes. Without an active structural change, these barriers will continue to undermine democracy's foundational values. Therefore, addressing the challenges of gender and intersectional representation in Indian democracy requires transformative changes rather than incremental adjustments. Structural changes such as implementing gender quotas, reducing the reliance on political lineage, and creating supportive policies for women's career progression are essential steps. However, these solutions necessitate a deep commitment to dismantling the deeply rooted biases that limit inclusive representation, which can only be actualised by a change in mindset. Additionally, those in positions to represent must be politically committed to effectively represent their social class. Only through such comprehensive changes can India's democratic institutions embody the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, ensuring they serve as inclusive spaces that genuinely represents the nation's diversity.

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