

## **Women's Political Participation and Mobilisation in India: Role of Reservation and Education**

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### **Abstract:**

Women's political participation is essential to a vibrant and inclusive democracy. In India, despite constitutional guarantees of equality, women have historically been underrepresented in political institutions due to social, cultural, economic, and structural barriers. Patriarchal norms, limited access to education, economic dependence, and lack of political opportunities have historically restricted women's involvement in decision-making processes. However, significant changes have occurred over the past few decades, particularly following constitutional reforms aimed at strengthening grassroots democracy. The enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments marked a turning point by reserving one-third of seats for women in rural and urban local governance institutions. These amendments formalised women's political inclusion and enabled millions of women to participate in governance for the first time. More recently, the 106th Constitutional Amendment Act extended the reservation principle to the national and state legislative levels by providing 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. Alongside reservation policies, education has become a transformative force in women's political mobilisation. Education raises awareness of rights, builds leadership skills, boosts confidence, and improves access to information, thereby enabling women to participate meaningfully in governance processes. Educated women are more likely to engage in political discourse, contest elections, and influence policy decisions that affect community development. This paper traces the historical evolution of women's political participation in India, analyses the impact of constitutional amendments and reservation policies on enhancing women's representation, and explores the vital role of education in promoting women's political empowerment. The study also discusses ongoing challenges such as patriarchal norms, financial barriers, and proxy representation that continue to hinder the full participation of women in politics. The paper argues that while legal reforms provide structural opportunities for women's involvement, ongoing educational and social reforms are crucial for achieving real gender equality in political decision-making.

**Keywords:**

Women's Political Participation, Political Mobilisation, Reservation Policy, Education and Empowerment, Gender Equality.

**Introduction:**

Political participation is one of the most essential pillars of democratic governance. It reflects the degree to which citizens are able to influence political decisions, public policy, and administrative processes. In democratic societies, inclusive political participation ensures that diverse social groups are represented in decision-making institutions. When all sections of society, including women, actively participate in governance, democratic systems become more representative, accountable, and responsive to public needs. In India, women constitute nearly half of the population, yet their representation in political institutions has historically remained limited. Although the Constitution of India guarantees equality before the law and provides universal adult franchise, women's actual participation in political decision-making institutions has remained disproportionately low. Since independence, women have enjoyed the right to vote and contest elections on equal terms with men. However, structural inequalities in society have prevented women from fully utilising these democratic rights. Several factors have historically contributed to the limited participation of women in Indian politics. One of the most significant barriers has been the persistence of patriarchal social structures that place women primarily within domestic roles. Cultural expectations often assign women the responsibility of household management and childcare, leaving them with limited time and opportunities to engage in public life. Furthermore, many women have faced restrictions on mobility and social interaction, thereby further constraining their ability to participate in political activities.

Economic dependence has also played a crucial role in restricting women's political participation. Political campaigns often require financial resources, social networks, and organisational support. Women, particularly in rural areas, frequently lack access to such resources. Political parties have historically been reluctant to nominate women candidates, often assuming that male candidates have greater chances of electoral success. As a result, women have remained underrepresented in legislative bodies at both the national and state levels. Another important factor influencing women's political participation is education. For many decades after independence, literacy rates among women remained significantly lower than those among men. Limited educational opportunities restricted women's awareness of their political rights and reduced their ability to engage effectively in governance processes. However, as educational opportunities for women have expanded over the years, their participation in political activities has gradually increased. The early 1990s marked a turning point in India's efforts to promote gender equality in political

participation. The adoption of democratic decentralisation reforms through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments created new opportunities for women to participate in governance at the grassroots level. These amendments introduced reservations for women in local government institutions, thereby institutionalising their participation in political decision-making.

A further significant development occurred with the enactment of the 106th Constitutional Amendment Act in 2023, popularly known as the Women's Reservation Act or Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam. This amendment provides 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, representing a major step toward gender-balanced representation in higher legislative institutions. Alongside institutional reforms, education has emerged as a powerful tool for women's empowerment and political mobilisation. Education enhances awareness, develops leadership capabilities, and encourages women to participate actively in governance. Educated women are more likely to contest elections, engage in community development initiatives, and influence policy decisions. This paper seeks to analyse the relationship between women's political participation, reservation policies, and education in India. It examines the historical evolution of women's political participation, evaluates the impact of constitutional reforms on political mobilisation, and highlights the importance of education in strengthening women's leadership in governance.

## **Literature Review:**

### **1. Historical Evolution of Women's Political Participation in India**

Women's participation in Indian politics can be traced back to the nationalist movement during the struggle for independence. During this period, women emerged as significant contributors to political mobilisation and public activism. Prominent leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Aruna Asaf Ali played important roles in mobilising public opinion against colonial rule. Their leadership demonstrated that women possessed the capacity to participate effectively in political movements and influence national struggles. These leaders not only challenged colonial authority but also questioned traditional gender roles that confined women to domestic spaces. Their participation encouraged other women to enter the public sphere and engage in political activism. The participation of women in mass movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Quit India Movement significantly expanded women's political engagement. These movements encouraged women from various social backgrounds to join protests, organise rallies, boycott foreign goods, and participate in civil disobedience campaigns. Women not only supported these movements but also assumed leadership roles at local and regional levels. In many instances, women organised picketing campaigns against liquor shops and foreign cloth stores,

participated in demonstrations, and faced imprisonment for their activism. This involvement demonstrated that women were capable of participating in public life and contributing meaningfully to national political struggles.

After independence, the adoption of universal adult franchise under the Constitution of India allowed women to participate in elections as voters and candidates. This provision ensured political equality and granted women the same democratic rights as men. However, despite these constitutional guarantees, women's representation in the Parliament of India remained extremely low. From the first general election in 1952 until the late 1980s, women's representation rarely exceeded seven per cent. Although a few women leaders emerged in national politics, their presence remained limited and did not significantly alter the gender imbalance in political institutions. Several social and economic factors contributed to this underrepresentation. Women often lacked access to education, financial resources, and political networks, which limited their ability to participate effectively in electoral politics. Cultural norms and gender stereotypes further reinforced the perception that leadership roles were primarily reserved for men. In many communities, women were expected to prioritise domestic responsibilities such as childcare and household management, leaving them with limited opportunities to engage in political activities. Additionally, political parties were often reluctant to nominate women candidates, assuming that male candidates had greater chances of electoral success.

A major transformation occurred in the early 1990s when democratic decentralisation reforms introduced reservations for women in local governance institutions. The enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments strengthened local self-government and established institutional mechanisms to ensure women's participation in governance. These reforms mandated that at least one-third of seats in local government bodies be reserved for women. As a result, millions of women entered political institutions for the first time and gained valuable experience in governance and public administration. This development significantly expanded women's political visibility and helped create a new generation of women leaders at the grassroots level. The increased participation of women in local governance has had broader social implications as well. It has contributed to a shift in societal attitudes toward women's leadership and has encouraged greater acceptance of women's involvement in public decision-making processes. Over time, the experience gained by women at the grassroots level has strengthened their confidence, leadership abilities, and political awareness, thereby laying the foundation for greater representation in higher political institutions.

## **2. Constitutional Provisions and Reservation Policies:**

The constitutional framework of India places strong emphasis on equality, social justice, and democratic participation. The Constitution of India guarantees

fundamental rights to all citizens regardless of gender, including equality before the law and equal opportunities in public life. However, despite these constitutional guarantees, women remained underrepresented in political institutions for several decades after independence. Recognising the need for structural reforms to address gender disparities in political representation, the Indian government introduced several policy measures to promote women's participation in governance. Among these reforms, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments stand out as landmark initiatives that strengthen local self-government and encourage democratic participation at the grassroots level. These amendments were enacted in 1992 and came into effect in 1993. Their primary objective was to decentralise political power and bring governance closer to the people by empowering local bodies. In doing so, they also created institutional mechanisms to ensure the participation of marginalised groups, including women and socially disadvantaged communities.

The 73rd Amendment established a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj Institutions in rural areas, consisting of village, intermediate, and district-level bodies. One of its most significant provisions was the reservation of at least one-third of all seats for women in these institutions. This reservation applied not only to general membership seats but also to chairperson positions at different levels of Panchayati Raj governance. This provision aimed to ensure that women had a guaranteed presence in decision-making processes and could influence policies related to local development and community welfare. Similarly, the 74th Amendment extended these provisions to urban local bodies, including municipalities and municipal corporations. By reserving seats for women in urban governance institutions, the amendment sought to enhance their representation in decision-making processes related to urban development, infrastructure planning, and public service delivery. Together, these two amendments fundamentally transformed the structure of local governance in India and created unprecedented opportunities for women to participate in politics. The introduction of reservation policies in local governance institutions resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of women elected to public office. Millions of women across rural and urban areas entered political institutions for the first time. This transformation not only increased women's representation but also provided them with valuable opportunities to gain experience in leadership, governance, and public administration. Women representatives began to actively participate in addressing community issues, including education, healthcare, sanitation, drinking water supply, and social welfare programmes.

The first International Women's Day was officially celebrated on 8th March 1910, and the year 2001 is recognised as the Women's Empowerment Year in India, as acknowledged by the Government of India. Regarding Women's Political Empowerment, scholars have proposed various definitions. Some of them are:

A) Keshab Chandra Mandal defined Women's Political Empowerment in his article Concept and

Types of Women Empowerment as:

Women's political empowerment implies the decentralization of power and authority in the deprived, oppressed and powerless people who have not been able to participate in the decision making process and implementation of policies and programs of both government organisations as well as familial and societal matters.

(Mandal, 2007)

B) The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research defined Women's Political Empowerment as:

Women's political empowerment is rooted in the historical struggle for suffrage and extends to active participation in political decision-making processes. It emphasizes the importance of women having the knowledge, skills, and networks necessary to influence political structures and policies effectively.

(Coghlan & Miller [ed.], 2014)

Over time, several Indian states recognised the positive impact of women's participation in local governance and expanded reservation quotas. States such as Bihar, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh increased the reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions from 33 per cent to 50 per cent. As a result, women now constitute a substantial proportion of elected representatives in local governance bodies. In fact, India currently has one of the largest numbers of women elected representatives at the grassroots level worldwide. This development has significantly enhanced women's visibility in political leadership and public decision-making.

The participation of women in local governance has also led to important social and developmental outcomes. Studies have shown that women leaders often prioritise issues related to health, education, drinking water, sanitation, and welfare programmes. Their leadership has contributed to more inclusive governance by ensuring that the concerns of women and marginalised communities receive greater attention in policy discussions. In addition, the presence of women in leadership positions has helped challenge traditional gender stereotypes and encourage broader societal acceptance of women's roles in public life. Another major milestone in the advancement of women's political representation in India was the passage of the 106th Constitutional Amendment Act. This legislation, commonly referred to as the Women's Reservation Act or

the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, provides for 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. The amendment also ensures that, within this reservation, seats will be allocated to women from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their existing quotas. The enactment of this amendment represents a historic step toward addressing gender imbalances in higher legislative institutions. For many years, women's representation in the Parliament of India remained relatively low compared to global averages. By introducing reservations at the national and state levels, the amendment aims to significantly increase the number of women legislators and promote gender-balanced representation in policymaking bodies. However, the implementation of the amendment is linked to the next delimitation exercise and census process, which means that its full impact will be realised in future electoral cycles. Nevertheless, the passage of the legislation reflects growing political recognition of the importance of women's participation in governance. It also demonstrates the increasing acceptance of gender-inclusive policies within India's democratic framework.

Overall, constitutional provisions and reservation policies have played a crucial role in promoting women's political participation in India. By creating institutional mechanisms that guarantee women's representation, these reforms have opened new pathways for women to engage in governance and public decision-making. While challenges remain, these constitutional initiatives have laid a strong foundation for advancing gender equality in political institutions and strengthening democratic participation in India.

### **3. Role of Education in Women's Political Mobilisation:**

Education plays a crucial role in empowering women and enabling their active participation in political processes. It promotes awareness, critical thinking, and social consciousness, which are essential for effective political participation and for shaping informed citizens who can engage in public discourse. Educated women are more likely to understand their constitutional rights, electoral procedures, and government policies. This awareness not only encourages greater voter participation but also empowers individuals to engage in public meetings, political discussions, and local advocacy. By making informed decisions, educated women play an active role in shaping political outcomes in their communities. Education also develops essential leadership skills, including communication, negotiation, and decision-making. These skills are fundamental in enabling women to perform their responsibilities as elected representatives more effectively, whether at the local, state, or national level. With these abilities, women can navigate complex political environments and advocate for their constituents' needs.

Prominent leaders have long emphasised the importance of women's education. The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, observed that educating women contributes not only to their own development but also to the

progress and well-being of the entire family and society. Similarly, the renowned poet Rabindranath Tagore highlighted the transformative power of female education, asserting that it is essential for maintaining social harmony and driving societal progress. Moreover, education also improves women's access to information through various media, digital platforms, and government resources. This access enables women to understand community needs better, identify gaps in services, and advocate for development programmes in health, education, sanitation, and welfare. With this knowledge, they are empowered to make informed decisions and to influence policies that affect their communities.

#### **4. Women's Political Mobilisation at the Grassroots Level:**

The introduction of reservation policies has significantly enhanced women's participation in grassroots governance, creating vital platforms for women to engage in public decision-making. Panchayati Raj institutions, established through constitutional reforms, have become key avenues for women's political involvement, providing opportunities to influence local policies and development initiatives. Women representatives often focus on issues directly affecting community welfare, such as access to drinking water, sanitation, primary education, and healthcare services. These areas of concern are critical to the overall development of communities, particularly in rural areas, where such services have historically been underserved. Their participation has contributed to more inclusive, responsive, and people-centred governance, ensuring that policies address the most basic yet essential needs of society.

In addition to addressing local issues, women leaders serve as role models for younger generations, challenging traditional gender stereotypes. Their presence in leadership positions encourages other women to participate in political activities and break free from societal limitations. This is particularly impactful in rural and conservative areas, where women's political visibility was once minimal. Grassroots mobilisation has also led to the formation of networks among women leaders, self-help groups, and community organisations. These networks are powerful tools for collective action, enabling women to pool resources, share knowledge, and mobilise on issues ranging from education to health. By working together, women strengthen their collective capacity to tackle local development challenges and advocate for policies that directly benefit their communities.

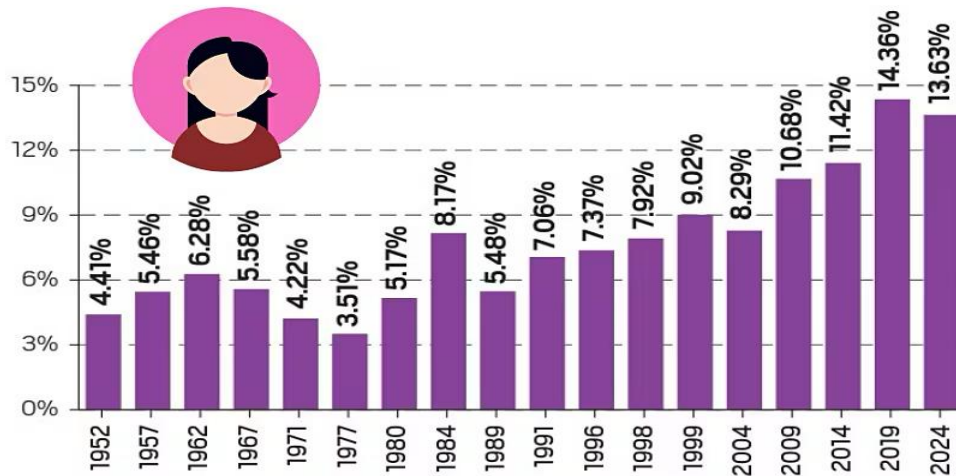
#### **5. Challenges to Women's Political Participation:**

Despite significant progress, several challenges continue to hinder women's full participation in politics. Patriarchal social norms remain a major obstacle, as women are often expected to prioritise domestic responsibilities over public engagement. These deeply ingrained cultural beliefs limit women's ability to pursue political careers, especially in rural and conservative areas where traditional gender roles are more rigidly enforced. The expectation that women must focus on household duties, care for children, and manage domestic

responsibilities leaves little time or energy for political involvement. This gendered division of labour perpetuates the notion that women's primary role is within the family rather than in public life. Another significant challenge is the phenomenon of proxy representation, commonly referred to as the "sarpanch pati" system. In this system, male relatives, often husbands or fathers, exercise control over elected women representatives, making decisions on their behalf. While these women may technically hold office, their political agency is severely undermined, as they often lack meaningful voice in governance. This practice not only diminishes the impact of women's political participation but also undermines the very spirit of empowerment that the reservation system was designed to achieve. Proxy representation reinforces patriarchal control and prevents women from exercising true autonomy in decision-making. Financial constraints also pose a significant barrier to women's political participation. Political campaigns, particularly at the state and national levels, require substantial financial resources for outreach, campaigning, and media presence. Women often face difficulties in securing financial support due to limited access to political networks and party resources. In many cases, women are excluded from political fundraising circles, which disproportionately affects their ability to run competitive campaigns. Without the financial means to support their candidacies, many potential women candidates are unable to participate in the electoral process, further perpetuating gender imbalances in political representation.

While women's representation in legislative bodies has gradually increased, it remains significantly lower than that of men. Despite the introduction of reservation policies in local governance, the share of women in higher political offices such as the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies remains small. This imbalance is particularly visible in political parties, where women are underrepresented in leadership positions and are often relegated to secondary roles. The barriers to women's entry into politics are complex, involving not only social and cultural factors but also political structures that have historically favoured male candidates. Addressing these challenges requires sustained efforts through a combination of policy reforms, educational initiatives, and social awareness programmes. Efforts to dismantle gender stereotypes and promote gender equality in political participation must be coupled with practical measures, such as financial support for women candidates, capacity-building programmes to strengthen their political skills, and the creation of more inclusive political networks. Additionally, it is important to encourage greater representation of women within political parties and decision-making bodies at all levels. These changes will help ensure that the increasing participation of women in grassroots governance translates into greater influence in higher political structures.

### CHANGE IN WOMEN'S STRENGTH IN LOK SABHA OVER THE YEARS



**Figure: Women's Representation in Lok Sabha**

The figure shows that although women's representation has steadily increased since independence, it remains considerably lower than men's. The 106th Constitutional Amendment is anticipated to tackle this inequality.

### Conclusion:

Women's political participation is essential for strengthening democratic governance and ensuring inclusive development. In India, significant progress has been made in promoting women's representation through constitutional reforms and reservation policies, laying a strong foundation for gender-inclusive governance. These legal changes have created pathways for women to engage meaningfully in the political process, contributing to the growth of a more representative and democratic society. The introduction of reservations through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments has enabled millions of women to participate in grassroots governance. These reforms have transformed local political institutions, providing women with a platform to influence decision-making and policy. By reserving one-third of seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies, these amendments have provided women with opportunities to gain leadership experience, build political networks, and develop skills crucial to future political participation at higher levels. The enactment of the 106th Constitutional Amendment Act represents another major milestone in the pursuit of gender equality in political representation. Once fully implemented, it has the potential to increase women's representation in Parliament and state legislatures significantly. This could reshape India's political landscape by ensuring that women are more equitably represented in the corridors of power and that their voices are heard in national policy discussions. However, the effectiveness of this amendment will depend on its successful implementation and on the creation of supportive environments in

which women candidates can thrive in competitive electoral arenas. However, legal reforms alone cannot guarantee genuine empowerment. While these policy changes provide essential structural opportunities, education remains a critical factor in enabling women to exercise their political rights effectively and participate confidently in governance processes. Education equips women with the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to navigate the complexities of politics and decision-making. It also empowers them to challenge social inequalities and patriarchal barriers that hinder their participation. Expanding educational opportunities for women, particularly in rural and marginalised areas, is therefore essential to strengthening democratic participation and fostering an environment in which women can lead effectively.

At the same time, persistent challenges such as patriarchal norms, financial barriers, and proxy representation must be addressed through comprehensive policy measures and social transformation. Patriarchal societal expectations continue to place disproportionate burdens on women, often relegating them to domestic roles and limiting their political engagement. The phenomenon of proxy representation, where male relatives exercise control over elected women's roles, undermines the very principles of democracy and gender equality. Moreover, financial constraints and limited access to political networks remain significant obstacles for women aspiring to political office. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-dimensional approach that combines legislative action with grassroots social movements to challenge gender norms, provide financial support for women candidates, and ensure that women can exercise their political agency without interference. By combining institutional reforms with educational empowerment and tackling social and financial barriers, India can move toward a more inclusive political system. Such a system would allow women to participate as equal partners in shaping the nation's democratic future. Women's leadership is crucial not only for advancing gender equality but also for developing policies that reflect the diverse needs of all citizens. With sustained efforts, India can build a political landscape in which women and men work together to ensure sustainable and inclusive development, strengthening democracy and making it more reflective of the people it serves.

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