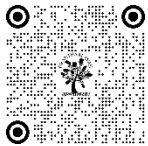# WOMEN IN POLITICS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF REPRESENTATION IN INDIA

Dr. Suresh Kumar M N [1]

[1] Associate Professor of Political Science, Govt. First Grade College, Hesaraghatta, Bangalore

ABSTRACT

The representation of women in politics is a critical issue in India, where gender disparities continue to persist despite constitutional guarantees of equality. This paper provides a comparative analysis of women's political representation in India, examining historical trends, key milestones, challenges, and efforts aimed at enhancing female participation in governance. Women in India have had a long and varied political history, with significant early contributions by leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Indira Gandhi. However, despite these prominent figures, women's representation in Indian politics has remained disproportionately low compared to their male counterparts. Historically, the political space in India has been shaped by deep-rooted patriarchal values, limiting women's access to political power and decision-making positions. Various initiatives, such as the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992, which reserved one-third of seats for women in local government bodies, and the proposed Women's Reservation Bill, have aimed at improving women's representation in politics. However, despite these measures, national and state-level representation continues to be far below global standards, with women holding only a small percentage of seats in Parliament and State Assemblies.

This paper highlights the key barriers women face in Indian politics, including societal attitudes, lack of political training, financial constraints, and gender-based violence. It also compares India's progress with other nations that have successfully implemented gender parity policies, such as Rwanda and Sweden. The paper concludes by discussing possible solutions, such as gender quotas, greater party support, and education initiatives, to foster a more inclusive political environment. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that women in India can participate fully in the political process and contribute to the country's governance on equal terms with men.

Keywords: Women, Politics, Representation, India

1. INTRODUCTION

Politics in India is characterized by its vibrant democracy, diverse population, and complex socio-political dynamics. As the world's largest democracy, India's political system is based on the framework of a parliamentary democracy, as outlined in the Constitution of India. The country gained independence from British rule in 1947, and since then, it has developed a multifaceted political landscape, which reflects its vast cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity. The Indian political system is divided into three branches: the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary. The President of India is the ceremonial head of state, while the Prime Minister is the head of government, holding significant executive powers. The Parliament of India, consisting of the Lok Sabha (Lower House) and Rajya Sabha (Upper House), plays a critical role in the formulation of policies and laws. India also follows a federal structure of government, with power shared between the central government and the states. Political parties in India are numerous and often align based on regional, caste, or ideological lines. The Indian National Congress (INC), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and several regional parties dominate the political scene. Elections in India are conducted at various levels—national, state, and local—through a

highly competitive process, with millions of voters participating. The political environment in India has witnessed significant milestones, including the struggles for independence, the introduction of social justice policies, and the rise of regional and caste-based politics. Today, Indian politics is a dynamic and evolving process, with a focus on addressing issues of economic growth, social inequality, and political representation.

1.1. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This paper provides a comparative analysis of women's political representation in India.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

2.1. WOMEN IN POLITICS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF REPRESENTATION IN INDIA

The role of women in politics has evolved significantly over time, from their limited involvement in governance and decision-making processes to their increasing presence in the political arena across the globe. In India, the representation of women in politics has been a subject of constant debate, considering the diverse socio-political and cultural landscape of the country. India, being a democratic nation with over a billion people, reflects a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, cultures, religions, and traditions. This diversity has had a profound influence on the role of women in Indian politics. Women in India have been historically marginalized and their political representation has been relatively low when compared to men. Despite this, women's political involvement has been marked by certain milestones and achievements, especially in the last few decades. Today, women in India have access to political office, and the political system includes laws that allow women to stand for elections and hold political positions. However, gender parity in political representation remains an unachieved goal.

The history of women's political participation in India can be traced back to the freedom struggle, where women like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay played significant roles. Women were involved in the Indian National Congress and other movements that fought for India's independence. After the country's independence in 1947, there was optimism regarding women's inclusion in the political process. The framers of the Indian Constitution, including Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, envisaged a democratic system where all citizens, regardless of gender, could participate in governance. Yet, post-independence, the political participation of women remained relatively low, despite the constitutional guarantees of equal rights. In the early years of India's democracy, women were underrepresented in Parliament, with only a few elected officials holding office. The 1952 general elections saw the election of 22 women to the Lok Sabha, which was an encouraging start but still represented a meager proportion compared to their male counterparts. Over the next few decades, women's representation in Parliament remained relatively stagnant, with numbers fluctuating between 5 and 10 percent. Despite this, women continued to play important roles in both state and national politics. In the 1990s, there was a gradual shift towards better representation of women, fueled by the global feminist movement and the growing awareness of gender equality. This was reflected in the greater inclusion of women in local bodies such as Panchayats and Municipalities following the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992, which mandated a certain percentage of seats for women. While this move represented a positive step toward increasing women's political involvement, the impact on national and state-level politics remained limited.

One of the key moments in this ongoing struggle for better representation of women was the introduction of the Women's Reservation Bill in 1996. This bill, which sought to reserve 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for women, has faced significant political opposition and has been a point of contention for years. Supporters of the bill argue that this reservation is necessary to ensure that women's voices are heard at the highest levels of decision-making. Opponents, however, claim that reservation would only benefit women from already privileged backgrounds and could hinder the democratic process. Despite the introduction of various policies and laws to enhance women's political participation, the actual representation of women in Indian politics remains low. The 2019 general elections, for example, saw only 14% of women elected to the Lok Sabha. This is a significant increase from previous elections, but it still represents a small proportion of the total number of MPs. Moreover, the number of women in higher political offices such as Chief Ministers or Cabinet Ministers remains far behind their male counterparts.

The limited representation of women in Indian politics can be attributed to several factors. Social and cultural norms in India have traditionally viewed women as caretakers of the family and home, and this has restricted their participation in public life. Patriarchal attitudes that dominate Indian society continue to marginalize women in many sectors, including politics. The lack of adequate political training, financial resources, and support networks for women candidates also contributes to their underrepresentation. Many women face discrimination within political parties themselves, where male politicians often hold dominant positions and control the decision-making processes. Furthermore, political parties often fail to field enough women candidates during elections, and when they do, these women often find themselves contesting in constituencies where they are unlikely to win. There is also a lack of a political environment that supports women's leadership. While women may occupy positions of power in certain areas, they often have limited influence over the broader political landscape, particularly in national and state-level governance.

Additionally, women candidates face challenges such as gender-based violence, intimidation, and harassment during the election process. The prevalence of these challenges discourages many women from entering politics or pursuing political careers. Even when women do succeed in politics, they often face a lack of recognition for their achievements, as their contributions are frequently overshadowed by their male colleagues. Despite these challenges, there have been notable successes in women's political representation in India. Women like Indira Gandhi, who served as the Prime Minister of India for over 15 years, and current politicians like Sonia Gandhi and Mayawati have broken through the glass ceiling and held powerful political positions. Indira Gandhi, in particular, remains a symbol of women's potential in politics. Her tenure as Prime Minister demonstrated that women could occupy the highest political office in the country and lead with authority and influence.

Moreover, there has been a gradual increase in the number of women elected to key political positions, particularly in regional politics. For instance, states like Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu have had women Chief Ministers who have held significant political power. While the numbers remain low, these women leaders have made substantial contributions to the political landscape in their respective states, providing a blueprint for greater female participation in politics. The rise of women's movements in India, especially since the late 20th century, has also played a pivotal role in advocating for better representation of women in politics. These movements have sought to challenge gender inequality, raise awareness about women's rights, and create platforms for women to voice their political concerns. Civil society organizations, women's NGOs, and grassroots activists have campaigned for policies that address issues such as women's safety, education, and healthcare, all of which are integral to empowering women politically.

In recent years, the political participation of women in India has also been encouraged through various training programs, leadership initiatives, and networking opportunities aimed at building a new generation of women politicians. The introduction of digital platforms has also provided women with a broader reach, enabling them to engage with the political process in innovative ways. Social media platforms have become powerful tools for political mobilization, allowing women to advocate for policy changes and raise awareness on key issues. Internationally, the representation of women in politics in India has often been compared to that of other countries. In countries such as Rwanda, Sweden, and Finland, women's representation in politics has reached levels of 30% and above. These countries have implemented various measures such as quotas, electoral reforms, and targeted recruitment of female candidates to ensure gender parity. In comparison, India still lags behind, with women's representation remaining far below the global average.

One possible solution to this issue could be the introduction of gender quotas in political parties, compelling them to nominate a certain percentage of women candidates. Another solution could involve creating a more supportive environment for women in politics, including access to political training, financial resources, and mentorship. Furthermore, there needs to be a greater emphasis on challenging cultural and societal norms that inhibit women from entering the political sphere. The role of women in politics in India is complex and multifaceted. While there has been progress in the political inclusion of women, the representation of women remains disproportionately low when compared to men. A variety of social, cultural, and institutional barriers continue to hinder women's full participation in politics. However, as the demand for gender equality grows stronger, there is hope that India will take more significant steps towards ensuring that women can take their rightful place in the political sphere. In order to realize this vision, both governmental and non-governmental efforts need to be strengthened, with a focus on removing the obstacles to women's political empowerment and fostering an environment of equality, respect, and opportunity for all citizens, regardless of gender.

Case Study: Indira Gandhi - The Political Legacy of India's First Female Prime Minister

Indira Gandhi, the first and only female Prime Minister of India, serves as one of the most significant figures in Indian political history. Her life and career offer a compelling case study in the intersection of gender, power, and political leadership in a complex, diverse, and deeply patriarchal society like India. Indira Gandhi's rise to the top of Indian politics, her tenure as Prime Minister, and her lasting impact on the country's political and social landscape make her an iconic example of women in power.

2.2. EARLY LIFE AND ENTRY INTO POLITICS

Indira Priyadarshini Gandhi was born on November 19, 1917, to Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, and Kamala Nehru. Growing up in a politically charged environment, Indira was exposed to the nationalist movement from a very young age. She was well-educated, having studied in India and abroad, which equipped her with the intellectual capacity to navigate complex political terrains. Her early life, however, was marred by the loss of her mother when she was just a child and her father's busy political career, which meant that she had limited interaction with him.

Her entry into active politics was largely influenced by her father's legacy and her close association with the Indian National Congress (INC). After her father's death in 1964, Indira Gandhi became an important figure in the INC, having been appointed the party's Vice President. Her political rise was, in part, a result of the political vacuum left after the death of prominent leaders like Lal Bahadur Shastri, who had served as Prime Minister following Nehru's passing. In 1966, Indira Gandhi was elected as the Prime Minister of India, a move that stunned many. At that time, the INC was facing internal turmoil, and many senior party leaders did not consider her as a strong candidate. Her appointment was seen as a result of backroom political negotiations, but her rapid rise signaled a change in the political dynamics of the country. She soon proved herself to be a shrewd political leader, capable of making bold decisions and steering India through several challenges.

2.3. LEADERSHIP AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Indira Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister, spanning from 1966 to 1977 and from 1980 to 1984, was marked by transformative policies, significant challenges, and an assertive style of governance. She took bold steps to strengthen India's position in the global arena and shape its domestic policies. Her leadership can be analyzed through several key moments that define her time in power.

2.4. THE GREEN REVOLUTION

One of the most significant achievements of Indira Gandhi's administration was the Green Revolution in the late 1960s. Faced with the threat of food shortages and famine, Gandhi implemented agricultural reforms aimed at increasing food production. She introduced high-yielding varieties of crops, improved irrigation, and modernized farming practices. This move helped India achieve food self-sufficiency and made the country less dependent on foreign food aid. The Green Revolution marked a period of economic growth in rural India, but it also brought with it debates over its long-term environmental impact and the deepening gap between rich and poor farmers.

2.5. THE 1971 INDIA-PAKISTAN WAR AND THE CREATION OF BANGLADESH

Another defining moment in Gandhi's leadership was her handling of the India-Pakistan war of 1971, which led to the creation of Bangladesh. Indira Gandhi's decisive leadership and strategic approach to the war earned her international acclaim. The war was a culmination of the political unrest in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), where millions of refugees fled to India, creating a humanitarian crisis. Gandhi's government supported the Bangladesh Liberation War, and in December 1971, Indian forces entered East Pakistan, defeating Pakistan and leading to the creation of Bangladesh. This military victory was seen as a defining moment in India's history and solidified Indira Gandhi's image as a strong and fearless leader. Her leadership during the war also helped strengthen India's position in global politics, as she emerged as a powerful figure in South Asia.

2.6. THE EMERGENCY (1975–1977)

One of the most controversial chapters of Indira Gandhi's political career was the declaration of a state of emergency in 1975. Faced with growing political opposition, economic challenges, and a court ruling that declared her election to be invalid due to electoral malpractice, Indira Gandhi took the drastic step of suspending civil liberties, censoring the press, and arresting opposition leaders. The emergency lasted for 21 months and saw the centralization of power in her hands. While some argue that the emergency was necessary to maintain political stability, others criticize it for being an authoritarian move that curtailed democratic freedoms. The emergency was a critical point in Indira Gandhi's political career, as it altered her relationship with the Indian public and opposition parties. After the emergency, Gandhi's popularity waned, and she lost the 1977 general elections, marking a temporary setback in her political career.

2.7. RETURN TO POWER AND ASSASSINATION

In 1980, Indira Gandhi returned to power after her party, the Congress, won a decisive victory in the general elections. Her second tenure as Prime Minister was marked by the rise of regional political movements, economic reforms, and growing tensions with Punjab. In 1984, the Operation Blue Star, a military operation aimed at removing militants from the Golden Temple in Amritsar, led to widespread violence and anger, particularly among Sikh communities. Indira Gandhi's decision to use military force to address the insurgency in Punjab alienated many, and on October 31, 1984, she was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in retaliation for the military operation. Indira Gandhi's assassination marked the end of an era in Indian politics, leaving a legacy that was both admired and criticized. She was mourned by millions of Indians, particularly those who viewed her as a symbol of India's strength and independence. Her death also led to widespread anti-Sikh violence, which marred her legacy further.

2.8. LEGACY AND IMPACT ON WOMEN IN POLITICS

Indira Gandhi's legacy in the context of women's political participation is multifaceted. As India's first female Prime Minister, she broke through the gender barriers of a patriarchal society and demonstrated that a woman could lead the country. Her rise to the top of the political hierarchy was a beacon for women, particularly in a society where women's political participation had been limited. However, Gandhi's leadership also brought with it complex contradictions. While she empowered women in many ways, her authoritarian style of governance and the controversial Emergency period raised questions about her commitment to democratic values. Despite these contradictions, Indira Gandhi remains an enduring symbol of female political leadership in India. Her political career paved the way for other women in Indian politics, such as Sonia Gandhi and Mayawati, who have continued to occupy powerful positions. Yet, Indira Gandhi's example remains exceptional, as the political landscape of India still faces significant challenges regarding gender parity in politics. Indira Gandhi's career also highlighted the challenges faced by women in politics, including the need for political parties to offer greater support for female candidates and leaders. Her legacy serves as both an inspiration and a reminder of the need for continued advocacy for gender equality in the political domain.

3. CONCLUSION

While significant strides have been made in promoting women's participation in politics in India, the path to true gender equality remains a work in progress. Women have made notable contributions to India's political landscape, exemplified by leaders like Indira Gandhi and numerous regional women politicians, yet their representation at the national and state levels remains disproportionately low. Barriers such as patriarchal cultural norms, lack of political resources, gender-based violence, and systemic discrimination continue to restrict women's active involvement in the political sphere. The introduction of policies like the 33% reservation for women in local government bodies and the ongoing discussions around the Women's Reservation Bill represent positive steps, but implementation has been inconsistent. To achieve gender parity in Indian politics, a multifaceted approach is needed, including the introduction of gender quotas, better political education, and stronger support networks for women candidates. Furthermore, addressing the cultural attitudes that hinder women's political participation is crucial for creating an inclusive, democratic political system. For India to fully harness its potential and achieve sustainable development, women must

be empowered to take on leadership roles in governance. The future of Indian politics lies in ensuring that women have equal representation and influence in the decision-making processes that shape the nation's destiny.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

Bhat, S. (2014). Gender and political participation in India: Examining the barriers and challenges faced by women in electoral politics. Journal of Political Science and Public Affairs, 2(3), 1-9.

Devika, J. (2009). Women in politics in India: The changing dimensions of women's participation in political processes. Economic and Political Weekly, 44(22), 89-96. https://www.epw.in/journal/2009/22/feature/women-politics-india.html

Htun, M., & Piscopo, J. M. (2010). Representation of women in the global South: Political parties, gender quotas, and the influence of cultural factors. Politics & Gender, 6(3), 516-546.

Kandiyoti, D. (2015). Women and politics in South Asia: A comparative perspective. In K. T. F. Joseph (Ed.), Politics and gender in the Indian context (pp. 91-113). Cambridge University Press.

Rajan, R. S. (2012). The women's reservation bill in India: The debate and its significance. Asian Journal of Comparative Politics, 3(1), 45-61.