

## **POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN LOK SABHA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF 1<sup>ST</sup> AND 18<sup>TH</sup> LOK SABHA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the success of democracy when the Right to Franchise for women gained recognition. With the spread of democracy and the extension of suffrage, the movement for the enfranchisement of women also got an impetus. After the Second World War, almost all countries had given this right to their women as a matter of course. In the Indian context, Mahatma Gandhi, who brought a completely new dimension into the debate on the women's question, said, "Women must have votes and an equal legal status. However, the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation." In his view, equal political and legal rights for women were merely the beginning of a process that would see women at the forefront of society's transformation by ending all forms of exploitation. Women's political rights and political status served as means in achieving political, social, and economic justice as well as 'equality of status' and opportunities. Therefore, its efficiency should be examined. Complete and absolute equality of sexes, guaranteed under Chapters III and IV of the Indian Constitution, which prohibit discrimination on the ground of sex and also allow legislation for protection and betterment of women in addition to equality was indeed revolutionary and a departure from Indian traditions. However, the irony remains that 75 years of constitutional guarantees to suffrage rights and the right to stand in elections, yet we don't see equality in the number of women vis-à-vis men in the Lok Sabha. How far have the constitutional guarantees, been realised in practice? What have been the major determinants of the trend either towards equality or away from it? Do women have the capacity to participate fully in the power process of society? Do they differ from men in their method of seeking and wielding power? Some of these questions are examined in this paper. An attempt has been made to compare the political participation of women in the first and the eighteenth Lok Sabha.*

**KEYWORDS:** Lok Sabha, Political Rights, Legal Rights, Political Participation.

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### **Introduction**

At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one country in the world had given franchise to its women- New Zealand (1893). By 1945, when the United Nations was formed, nearly 50 percent of its member states gave suffrage rights to their women. Within 2 decades, 114 out of 125 members had constitutionally guaranteed voting rights to women. Newly independent countries like India and Turkey had given the right to vote to their women before developed countries like the Netherlands and Switzerland.

According to many scholars, the nationalist movement required women's participation in the national movement. This paved the way for their progress in most countries in Asia. Enlisting the support of women for the nationalist cause and securing their participation in the freedom movements became a

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practical manifestation of the ideologies of social reformer and nationalist leaders. In the process, women found opportunities to play roles, not previously open to them. Female emancipation and nationalist emancipation progressed together in new states. In the Socialist states, revolution proved to be the catalyst in almost a similar manner as the nationalist struggles in colonial countries.

The preamble of the Constitution of the Indian Republic promises "to secure to all its citizens justice-social, economic and political; liberty- of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality- of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all; fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the nation". To realise these goals, the Constitution makers added a chapter on Fundamental Rights in Chapter III, and Directive Principles of State Policy in Chapter IV of the Constitution. 'Equality of opportunities in public employment and office under the state' is guaranteed by Article 16. This clause has helped Indian women get important jobs and places of power, as shown by the growing number of women working in government and holding high-level political positions, even the President and Prime Minister. Cabinet Ministers, Chief Ministers, Judges and Governors. Universal Adult franchise, that seeks enfranchisement irrespective of sex, has been sort for by the feminists, so that women enjoy full and equal rights in political decision making as well as power sharing.

'In a parliamentary democracy like India, participation in politics has to be viewed at two levels- the level of acquisition and exercise of power and the exercise of political rights of citizens. The study of General Elections at these two levels offers certain quantitative measures of participation of women, both as voters and as candidates.' Women's political participation is their ability to participate with men at every level and stage in all aspects of the political sphere. While the analysis of contestants' behaviour throws light on the various aspects of involvement at the first level, that of the voters' behaviour may offer valuable insights into engagement at the second level.

There is no doubt that women are numerous enough at the lowest levels of politics- at polls, as campaigners and doing many other things- but remarkably scarce at the upper levels where decisions that affect the life of the country, state and nation are made. This article attempts to discuss the participation of women at these two levels, emphasizing women's role and participation in the Lok Sabha- the highest representative body in India. This is studied through an analysis of election data and actual Lok Sabha debates. Comparative analysis and observations are based on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections, 1952 and 2024, respectively.

Politics in 1952 was an exciting new public diversion, replacing the processions, jail goings, lathi charges and shouting of slogans or the outbursts of violence during the freedom struggle. By western reckoning it was strictly impossible for an illiterate, pre-dominantly rural population, and millions of totally ignorant women on the electoral roll to vote coherently. Such commentators did not comprehend the long tradition and force of news and propaganda that passes from person to person with unbelievable speed in India, to all parts of the country. They did not understand, the illiterate people can be wise.

In 1952 men and women got down to the serious task of exercising their votes and millions of women went to polls. It was no doubt the biggest electorate in human history. Women veiled and unveiled, from orthodox Muslim mohallas, tribal villages and metropolitan cities trekked to cast their vote.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> General Elections (1952), there were approximately 8 crore women voters in India, and from amongst those, nearly 28 lakh eventually failed to disclose their proper names. Only 43 women contestants out of 1874, competed for the 489 seats in the Lok Sabha. Finally, 14 women were elected, which constituted 2.86% of the 1<sup>st</sup> Lok Sabha. In the state legislature, out of 3641 elected, 98 were women. The trailblazers in the Lok Sabha were women like Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, Sucheta Kriplani, Durgabai Deshmukh, Renuka Ray, among others. Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur was the sole woman Cabinet Minister in the first Lok Sabha.

As per the 2022 Census, there are 65.19 crore women in India, with more than 50 crore adult women. As per the Election Commission of India data, the 2024 general elections clocked 65.8% female voters. Despite increased female voter participation, only 9.5% (797) of the total candidates, 8360, were women, and only 74 were elected. These 74 women constitute 13.6% of the present Lok Sabha, which is .8% less than women's representation in the 2019 Lok Sabha, which stood at 14.4%. There are 13% women members in Rajya Sabha. In the current Lok Sabha, 7 women have been inducted in the Council of Ministers and 2 of them have been given Cabinet berths.

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



Women's participation was marked by hesitation and societal restraint in the first General elections. Out of the total electorate, about 37% of the women cast their vote, while male turnout was significantly higher. Cultural barriers, low literacy levels and reluctance to reveal personal details, such as their names prevented millions of women from participating.

In 2024, the story has changed dramatically. Women's turnout has reached 67% in some states, even surpassing the male turnout. This shift reflects increased awareness, improved access and targeted efforts by Election Commission to encourage women voters through gender sensitive initiatives like women-managed polling booths and voter education program.

At the same time, it should be noted that Lok Sabha elections were held after the Parliament passed the Women's Reservation Bill in September 2023. This Bill gives 33% reservation to women in Lok Sabha, Legislative Assembly and Delhi Legislative Assembly for the next 15 years. 'Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam' will be implemented only after the delimitation of constituencies is done in 2026 and we will see what change it has been able to garner only in 2029.

India, during its presidency of the G-20 countries, initiated an inclusive approach, wherein women were seen assuming active roles in political decision-making. The conservative, patriarchal stereotype norms were challenged and gender sensitive, 'pro-women' policymaking was initiated last year. There is a need for a more nuanced understanding of women's empowerment, which focuses on their ability to engage, decide and lead.

As a result, India's progress towards having more women in leadership roles has been sluggish and rarely systematic or organised. They are pushed to the political periphery. Furthermore, according to the 'Inter-Parliamentary Union's Parline database, India ranked 143 out of 185 nations in the world' for women's representation in the lower house of parliament before the general elections in 2024.

In Indian Society, women suffered from many imposed hinderances in their effort to play a meaningful role in politics. Since independence, many of these impediments have been removed. The process of 'liberating', 'emancipating' and 'empowering' women has caught up with the pace. However, it is challenging to work out the implications of this ongoing process on women's roles and participation in politics.

Though half of the electorate of the country consists of females, they are not contributing their fifty percent share in returning the MLAs and MPs for the formation of the government. On the face of it, the studies do not suggest that men are opposed to conceding equality to women. Had it been so, the Women's Reservation Act (106<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Indian Constitution) wouldn't have seen the light of day. All the political parties agree on the principle of sex equality, though they may disagree on certain points of detail. Nobody, in the country, in or outside Congress party, was opposed to the leadership of Mrs. Gandhi because of her sex.

### Reasons for Low Political Participation

Though there has been a far-reaching improvement in women's participation in other fields, their political involvement is perturbing. "Women's participation in the political process has shown a steady increase, both in elections and in their readiness to express their views on issues directly concerning their day-to-day life." This can be attributed to higher literacy rates, better workforce participation, awareness campaigns, etc. 'But their ability to produce an impact on the political process has been minuscule.'

The majority of Indian women, being illiterate, are unlikely to fight for their rights. Former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi said, "Our women have more rights than women of other countries, but there are large areas wherein the women are suffering, especially in areas where, maybe, they are not conscious of their rights."

How women get involved in politics and how politically active they are in their country will always depend on the political situation there. Mahatma Gandhi's call to women in the anti-colonial struggle was very conducive for this process. Gandhi's emphasis on socio-political emancipation of women contributed to the process. Politicisation and participation are closely linked. The states that have a higher level of modernisation have higher politicisation. Politics became more and more a 'Men Only' domain. Parties didn't offer seats to women. Most of the political parties followed the policy of 'tokenism' in giving tickets to women aspirants. Parties must take deliberate efforts to place women members in both party organisations and outside, in positions of authority. It has also been noted, that women from political families exhibit greater political awareness and greater participation. This suggests that family tradition and the influence of the individual become significant factors in socialisation.

'Patriarchal Norms and gender stereotypes' pose a hinderance to women's participation in political life. The 1<sup>st</sup> as well as the 18<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections show that on one hand there are issues related to party nomination, at the organisational level, on the other hand the reluctance of spouse or family to allow women to venture into territories which generally involve corruption, mudslinging, crime; image tarnishing, violence, threats and often demand unlimited working hours, ignoring health, family life, amongst others. Money is also needed to contest elections, yet they have maintained their visibility in all these years.

Under the first-past-the-post method, established male candidates who have a lot of financial and organisational backing are given the edge.

Lack of attention to the political education and experiential learning of women, by political parties as well as women's organisations. The problem of underrepresentation of women in political bodies is real despite the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments to the Constitution of India, which give one third representation to women in local and urban bodies of local self-government.

'The process of Indian women coming into their own politically has been slow and halting because Indian political culture is apolitical, and the force of tradition has been particularly against the participation of women in politics.' Improving the political status of women is an integral aspect of the overall problem of socio-economic change and broadening the political elite structure.

Women in legislative bodies face threats, violence, harassment and intimidation which can deter them from participating.

Transforming symbolic inclusion into substantive leadership requires a multipronged approach. The Indian society has failed to "look upon women's participation with sympathy and understanding," which is an impeding factor in the 'political socialisation' of both women and men. Reservations in legislatures will hopefully alter the very character of our Parliament, state legislative assemblies, and rural-urban self-governing units. It will force the political parties to change their strategies and tactics and induce them to give women their due. Reservation, is expected to bring about the anticipated change. It's a hope that women's participation will motivate them to shoulder their political responsibilities.

The renewed debate indicates that the problem of 'marginalisation and exclusion of women' is a real one. There has been a powerful PM, Presidents, a few Chief Ministers, and Governors in States but, on the whole women have not made much progress in the political field, despite laws that have been made to treat them as equal citizens. We guaranteed women's equal participation in democracy and respected their views by granting them the opportunity to vote. Now, we will guarantee women's equal participation in maintaining democracy by giving them the opportunity to develop and promote the citizens' collective rights.

"More feasibly, pushing the grassroots-level female leaders to new heights and encouraging women to pursue politics as a career through civic participation can change the status quo gradually."

'The need of the hour thus demands a sociological transformation, which forces a breakaway from the past. After all, if India wants to fulfill its great power ambition, establish itself as a major power, and have a greater say at the global stage, it cannot afford to leave out half of its population, nor can it continue rolling out symbolic gender policies that, in reality, carry little to no weight. India, which has set

an excellent example in terms of women's political participation at the local level, must bring out more women representatives at the state as well as national level.' (Vina Majumdar)

The problem of making women's role in politics more effective, more autonomous, and more significant is closely interwoven with basic issues in social organisation, power distribution and developmental trends, and cannot be understood in isolation from them. If the examination has helped to dissipate some popular myths, and raise larger questions for which answers are not immediately available, then its limited objectives have been fulfilled.

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