Bulletin of Nexus
Multidisciplinary International Research Journal, Double-Blind Peer Reviewed, Open Access Journal
ISSN : 3065-7865 / Volume-3, Issue-1, January 2026

Original Article

Women's Political Participation and Democratic Empowerment in India

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Manuscript ID:
BN-2026-030128

ISSN: 3065-7865

Volume 3

Issue 1

January 2026

Pp 133-139

Submitted: 20 Dec 2025

Revised: 30 Dec 2025

Accepted: 15 Jan 2026

Published: 31 Jan 2026

DOI:
10.5281/zenodo.21234490

DOI link:
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21234490

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between women's political participation and democratic empowerment in India. It traces the historical evolution of women's involvement in politics from the freedom movement to the contemporary democratic framework. The paper analyzes constitutional and legal provisions that promote women's political rights, including reservation policies and the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions. It further explores the socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional barriers that limit women's effective participation in political processes. The study highlights the significance of political representation, party strategies, civil society engagement, and policy initiatives in advancing women's empowerment. While women's participation as voters and representatives has increased substantially, especially after the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, challenges such as patriarchy, social inequality, limited legislative representation, and inadequate implementation of empowerment policies continue to persist. The paper concludes that meaningful political participation is essential for strengthening democracy, achieving gender equality, and ensuring inclusive governance in India.

Keywords: *Women's Political Participation; Democratic Empowerment; Gender Equality; Political Representation; Panchayati Raj Institutions; Women's Reservation; Electoral Politics; Constitutional Provisions; Democratic Governance; Women's Empowerment.*

Introduction

Women have historically taken an active and dignified part in the Indian struggle for freedom. Many women participated in the freedom movement and sacrificed their lives for the cause of national integration. They actively participated in the civil disobedience movement. Records show that women accounted for 19% of the total participants in the Quit India Movement of 1942. The Nationalist Movement made people aware of the importance of women and their role in society (Victoria Olivera, 2019). Under the Constitution of India, women enjoy the same political rights as men. They are eligible to vote and stand for elections, and there is no specific provision that prohibits women from contesting elections. The political empowerment of women is defined by the extent to which women actively participate in any political action, such as voting, as well as awareness of and adherence to policies affecting women (ROY, 2016). Women's reservation is one of the proposals put forward to empower women politically. Since 1996, several Women's Reservation Bills have been introduced in Parliament to reserve 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for women. However, the Bill has not yet been passed.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Women's political participation is an essential requirement for enhancing democracy and empowerment for women. In most of the democracies, electoral representation has improved, but the overall political participation in most of the countries is at a much lower level.

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How to cite this article:
Totewad, S. J. (2026). Women's Political Participation and Democratic Empowerment in India. Bulletin of Nexus Journal, 3(1), 133–139. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21234490

Quick Response Code:

Website: https://bnir.us

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In the contemporary electoral democratic system, participation of the women in the political processes like voting and candidacy is a gender indicator. Political empowerment of women is essential for achieving the sustainable development goal of SDG-5. The central research question is: Has political participation of women in electoral politics, improved democratic empowerment of women in India? The present study shows that political participation of women in India has improved since independence, yet it is at a very low level. After 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments, women have received garter voting rights in local self-governance elections as also in parliament and assembly elections. They have been participating in these elections both as voters and as candidates, yet due to patriarchal system many still remain disempowered. On 2013-14 only 34% of women were politically participated yet large-scale data on how political participation is being related to the democratic empowerment is still needed. The political empowerment of women is crucial for the sustainable development goal of gender equality (ROY, 2016).

Historical Trajectory of Women's Political Participation in India

Women's political participation in India exhibits distinctive historical patterns shaped by the nation's constitutional evolution and social transformation. Although women have exercised rights to political engagement since the colonial era, significant momentum in their participation followed the independence struggle. The early years of the Republic, associated with constitutional consolidation and social realignment, constituted a second critical phase. Pivotal moments—such as the approach to independence and the framing of the Constitution—led to the mass mobilization of women for political action. Partly as a result of their active involvement, the Constitution granted women equal rights in the political arena.

Subsequent decades saw a gradual decline in women's political engagement, notwithstanding the formal constitutional provisions and several legal developments affirming their rights. The second half of the 20th century represented a period of stagnation, with no major legal or institutional advancement affecting women's political engagement. Women remained politically active, however, particularly in the realms of social work and education.

Women's formal political participation exhibited a notable resurgence in the 1990s and 2000s, emerging as a third significant phase. Legislative reforms mandating reservations for women in local governance prompted the formation of an extensive network of women leaders and generated widespread engagement in grassroots political activity. Although national and state-level politics remained largely inaccessible due to entrenched socio-economic barriers, the revitalized local-level engagement represented a breakthrough in the women's political empowerment movement. Consequently, a profusion of literature addressing the issue first emerged in the 1990s. Substantial government action also took place in the same period to enhance women's empowerment, culminating in the declaration of 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment.

Legal and Constitutional Provisions for Women's Political Empowerment

Women's political empowerment has been fostered through legal and constitutional provisions intended to facilitate participation, safeguard rights, and fulfil representation quotas; these measures are supplemented with mechanisms to monitor compliance and strengthen enforcement. Individuals and communities are expressly entitled to participate in political processes, with explicit provisions for free and fair elections. Multiple targeted initiatives promote women's empowerment and political engagement (P A & T T Neena, 2017). Formal political avenues complement women's ongoing struggles against systemic discrimination and violence, particularly within domestic spaces (ROY, 2016).

The right to participate in elections was enshrined in Article 326 of the Constitution, which grants citizens aged eighteen years and older the right to vote in free and fair elections. The Constitution mandates the State to develop women's survivorship and encourage empowerment through education, socio-economic deliberation, and self-activity. Article 15 prohibits discrimination based on sex, and Article 14 guarantees equality before the law. Articles 325 and 326 ensure free and fair elections, establishing legal ground for direct participation. Even broader frameworks for political engagement find expression in Articles 40 and 243 of the Constitution, along with subsequent provisions in the Panchayati Raj Amendment. Article 40 asserts that the State shall take steps to secure the organisation of village panchayats for purposes of local self-government, and Article 243 aims to enhance democracy and political participation.

The Constitution embodies a commitment to democratic decentralisation through the establishment of local bodies. Recognition of women as a politically and socially disadvantaged group led to provisions for greater participation in

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the form of reservation policies. These measures first appeared in a fortieth amendment and were consolidated through a subsequent thirty-three per cent reservation for women in the three-tier system. Panchayati Raj elections have taken place regularly since 1995, with reserved seats at the local level ensuring legislative representation, even among quotas at the State and National levels, along with reserved constituencies for both rural and urban bodies reaching upwards of thirty-three per cent. Reserved seats are complemented by provisions for easy candidature for the remaining seats. In addition to rights of access, women benefit from affirmative measures to encourage participation and mitigate social conditioning perceived as barriers.

Socioeconomic Determinants and Barriers

Political theories advancing participatory and constituent representation since the women's movement since the 1970s recognise that the inclusion of women and other marginalized groups in political institutions is vital for democratic empowerment. Participation is deemed salient at both the electoral level—expressing political choices in elections or political engagement through non-electoral means—and the institutional level, where the political society plays a critical role in societal empowerment. Political institutions play a salient role in enhancing women's empowerment and facilitating their social, economic, and political development. Studies indicate that women's political participation is hindered by several factors, particularly socioeconomic determinants in developing countries. In India, women from educated, urban, and higher castes participate more and more actively in society. Those belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and lower-income groups remain less empowered and have reduced participation.

Moreover, the pronouncement of equal rights in the Constitution did not eliminate the influence of social customs and religious practices on the status of women. Consequently, several women's movements emerged in India between the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century. The movements focused on diverse issues from rights, violence, employment, and property to affirmative action for political empowerment. They reinforced the official and constitutional debate on constitutional and legal reform. Caste and religious minorities remain politically under-represented despite the inclusion of a third dimension of rightful representation in the Constitution. Gender-conscious policies, such as reservation (affirmative action) for women in certain political institutions available since 1993, enhance election participation of women candidates and elected representatives at the grassroots level. Contestation also motivates political initiatives and constitutional engagement. (Nayak & Mahanta, 2009)

Political Institutions, Representation, and Parties

Women's political participation significantly correlates with broader democratic empowerment, yet Indian institutions permit only limited representation and voice. Financial and social inequalities sustain barriers to women's candidacy, yet political selection, local dynamics, and civil society amplify the impact of women's engagement on political outcomes. Access to political office is, therefore, crucial for men as well as women: attenuation of women's participation translates into reduced opportunities for men from lower castes, worker backgrounds, and historically oppressed communities.

Parties remain central to both political representation and the policy-making agenda. Women's presence on party tickets signals a commitment to women's issues, and overall women's representation widens the voice, consideration, and policy impact of broader segments of the population. Parties selectively incorporate women's empowerment into their platforms on the agenda-setting front; capturing and shifting this narrative to facilitate women's inclusion therefore becomes essential for those seeking to enhance their impact within both state and civil society.

Enhancing women's political participation through institutional accommodation, affirmative Action policies, and party responsiveness, would reap constituent-style economic returns and allow broader public agendas to reshape transformative change. Attribution of women's political participation solely to disadvantage through educational policies fails to articulate how states that attract marginal public investment consistently register higher figures of women in political services and women's `mass public mobilization' programs take root where underclass Section 9 intercession is non-existent (ROY, 2016).

1. **Reservation Policies and Legislative Representation**

Legislative representation is crucial for the democratic empowerment of women. Although the Indian Constitution guarantees equal rights in political participation and affirmative measures to ensure inclusion, the level of women's representation remains low. Comparable to several others across the world, women's legislative representation in India is at 14%, far below their population share of 50% (P A & T T Neena, 2017).

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To enhance women's representation in politics, the Government of India introduced reservation policies at the national and state levels in the 1990s. These measures were initially applied to local-tier governance structures such as Panchayati Raj Institutions but were gradually extended to higher levels of governance and different bodies (Victoria Olivera, 2019).

These reservation policies in India are both limited and extensive. On one hand, they provide short-term interventions to help identify deserving women candidates and give them sufficient space in the political process. On the other hand, they attempt to maximize women's access over a considerable period, extending to all bodies of the governance structure (ROY, 2016). Reservation policies have been instrumental in promoting women's representation in the nation. They have positively impacted their agendas, facilitating their entry into the political mainstream.

2. **Party Strategies, Candidate Selection, and Electoral Dynamics**

Women lack significant representation in the political sphere, particularly among the candidates fielded in elections. Political parties adopt varied strategies and practices concerning candidates and their selection. The provision of age and criminality information is mandatory but is utilized by political parties mainly for their own advantage. The distribution of these details concerning the candidates of the political parties operating in India shows significant differences across all parties, suggesting that dissatisfactory practices are being employed. Political parties in India have been lax regarding the selection of female candidates. This could be attributed to male-dominated party machinery, lack of political will to provide female candidates with a level playing field, and the perception that political activity is inappropriate for women; it is easier, therefore, for parties to pursue male candidates. A very small portion of political parties operates in states where their candidates are elected without contesting. Political parties therefore apply different strategies according to the political stakes involved, while the overall objective remains the same: to win elections. Candidate information has been significantly augmented through the initiatives taken towards increasing transparency by the election commission in India. While political parties possess the autonomy to choose their candidates, transparency dictates that they at least provide the information as mandated by the commission.

The selection and nomination processes adopted by parties impact the quality of democracy and the type of representation that citizens receive within the democratic framework. This selection process plays a pivotal role in the broader decision-making and governance process, as well as in the daily lives of common citizens. In addition, the selection of candidates is crucial for understanding women's political empowerment. Political parties and ticket allocation influence the extent of women's representation, especially under the current system of multi-party competition where the role of political parties is central to the distribution of power. In this national context where ordinary voters possess limited information, political parties serve as crucial intermediaries through which women candidates are proposed and elected. Thus, the nature and characteristics of political competition have a profound bearing on women's formal participation in politics and electoral decision-making at the highest levels (ROY, 2016).

3. **Women's Movements and Civil Society Engagement**

Women's movements and civil society engagement in India have been instrumental in advocating for women's rights and representation and addressing various issues affecting women. Indeed, civil society has been a significant part of India's women's movement. In the early 1960s, the Indian Women's Movement gathered strength because of growing public concern for the welfare of Muslim women, the lack of personal law reform, and the limited representation of women in political and social spheres. Organizations such as the All India Women's Personal Law Committee began raising awareness about the need to reform Muslim personal law regarding marriage, divorce, and maintenance.

Inadequate political representation hampered engagements with policymakers, particularly when Parliament debated the reforms. So, some activists pursued access to the political sphere by joining established political parties, while other activists sought membership in non-party organizations in order to promote women's issues independently. As the Indian state began to rely on civil-society organizations to deliver welfare services to the population, many women-oriented groups emerged as local service providers, asserting a mandate and engaging in debates on women's issues. These groups thus succeeded in expanding the knowledge and understanding of women's rights, while also highlighting discrimination against women in the family and in a variety of public spheres.

From the mid-1980s onward, the piecemeal nature of reforms and the persistence of socioeconomic bases for discrimination against women prompted developmental aid agencies to support a broader and bolder agenda through civil society. Such a transformation linked the women's movement with varied sectors of society mobilized around issues

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such as housing, health, education, employment, and the environment. Women activists emerged from these movements as broader constituencies began addressing concerns related to the unequal treatment, exploitation, and discrimination of women. The collaboration among groups across social movements forged networks like the Coalition for Women's Rights in India, established in 1990. Various incidents of violence against women galvanizing collective action further linked women's rights, civil rights, and the protection of constitutional guarantees (P A & T T Neena, 2017).

Policy Initiatives and Echoes of Empowerment

Policy initiatives such as long- and short-term measures of state action, government schemes, and women's rights laws—ascriptive initiatives—aim to bring about fundamental changes in society and the status of women, eliminating the deep-rooted social attitudes that discriminate against women remain a challenge (Nayak & Mahanta, 2009). Policy initiatives are designed, with necessary resources for effective implementation, to achieve pre-determined goals and objectives and address socially and politically marginalised and disadvantaged communities (Kumari Pandey, 2014). These inputs are essential and not sufficient, therefore, evaluation of the impacts of development policies in terms of women's overall empowerment. Women's political empowerment one the agenda of women empowerment initiatives a range of governmental non-governmental and international organisations. The National Policy for Empowerment of Women adopted in 2001 envisages the strategy for the advancement, development, and empowerment of women in a multifaceted and integrated manner covered national and state-level development through the process of capacity-building, skill development, and enhancing awareness through targeting towards local bodies and elected representatives.

1. **Implementation Gaps and Accountability Mechanisms**

Policies aimed at empowering women politically and socially have emerged at multiple governmental levels. These policies are intended to enhance women's capacity as voters and candidates while also enabling their participation and leadership in civil society. Four broad categories of such initiatives can be identified: (1) affirmative action and accompanying strategies, (2) civil society movement and engagement, (3) access to financial resources, and (4) awareness of political rights, rules, and regulations (P A & T T Neena, 2017). Appropriate implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of these policies and programs are essential for determining their effectiveness and guiding their redesign.

Administrative, political, and logistical bottlenecks are significant obstacles in the pursuit of women's empowerment in India. Except for states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, women's participation and leadership in the political sphere largely remains inadequate. Effective monitoring frameworks accompanied by implementation and accountability mechanisms to measure the progress and impact of women's empowerment policies are either missing or poorly operationalized (Nayak & Mahanta, 2009). Mechanisms for undertaking such evaluations exist but implementation is lacking. High-level political support and movement sustainability remain weak in a number of states, and schemes designed for the empowerment of women have been implemented with further delay.

2. **Local Governance and Panchayati Raj Institutions**

The landmark 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India, enacted in 1992, has significantly enhanced women's political participation at the local level by instituting a three-tier system of rural local governance known as the Panchayati Raj system. The 73rd Amendment mandates the establishment of Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) in every State and Union Territory and prescribes the composition, structure, and duration of local bodies at the Village, Block, and District levels. More than one million elected representatives across the country serve as the functioning tier of grassroots democracy, of which close to 14,00,000 are women. Reservations are mandated for Women in PRIs at both the upper and lower tiers that range from one-third to fifty per cent depending upon the State (P A & T T Neena, 2017). PRIs occupy a unique and significant position in grassroots democracy in the country and continue to be a source of women's empowerment, and of women in PRIs providing policy learning and conveying local needs and aspirations from the bottom to the top of the governance structure.

Impact on Governance, Public Policy, and Democratic Norms

Women's political participation plays a crucial role in nurturing democracy, promoting good governance, and improving developmental policies (P A & T T Neena, 2017). Women's representation in local governance significantly influences the quality and direction of local development policies. Dimensions of good governance such as efficiency, accountability, and transparency of government institutions, and greater public accountability and involvement in the policy process are positively affected by

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women's representation (Nayak & Mahanta, 2009). Strengthening the democratic process through increased women's representation may take the form of securing autonomy and self-determination to pursue their own national and local priorities. The women's movement and civil society organisations have played a leading role in influencing governmental policy space.

Comparative Perspectives and Regional Variations

The status of women in politics and governance in India is examined over time, from the dawn of independence through to the present day. A distinction is made between the concepts of political participation and political engagement; although the first has increased, the second—particularly in the formulation of public policies that impact women directly and indirectly—remains low. This analysis employs a historical perspective, viewing the issue of women's participation in politics and governance in India through two lenses. Key moments and actors in the development of the movement, and their connection to societal change and institutional reform, establish the first lens. The second traces the evolution of the enabling environment for women's political engagement.

Challenges, Risks, and Future Pathways

Women's political participation in contemporary India is hampered by institutional, cultural, and economic limitations, which impede the prospect of greater and more meaningful engagement in the polity. Now both formal party politics and informal political activism are increasingly dominated by men, and the historical concern with women's representation as voters is becoming secondary to the much more serious issue of their exclusion as candidates. Women's representation in the Lok Sabha has decreased dramatically since the 1960s, and in provincial assemblies the situation is often even worse. "Women's political participation" in such contexts, therefore, means not simply access to electoral rights for women but, more fundamentally, the degree to which women can become politicians rather than merely voters (ROY, 2016).

In this context, the introduction of a reform officially aimed at enhancing women's political participation is both a major opportunity and a potential trap. An earmarking of a percentage of seats for women would theoretically permit a further substantial increase in women's representation—but it would do so in a manner that, by parting company with the expanded understanding of women's participation outlined earlier, might reinforce the exclusion of women from the political sphere per se. Such earmarking would thereby potentially mitigate the overtly excluded-status of women voters while, paradoxically, reaffirming the already exclusionary character of women politicians (Nayak & Mahanta, 2009). Well-designed policies could foster a deeper and therefore more genuine political participation for women, in a lasting fashion that would not depend on further artificial earmarking. The fundamental question is whether wider civil rights for women can yet be formally concealed behind a narrowly circumscribed reform; if so, there is little prospect of any genuine entry for the excluded into the polity.

Conclusion

India's political landscape is a cornerstone of its democracy and an important facet of its social structure. Women's political participation is vital for the healthy functioning of democracy and the empowerment of women in society. Without their participation and representation, equality remains elusive and unchecked social injustice prevails (Nayak & Mahanta, 2009). Women in India engage in a wide range of political activities, from mobilizations for peace and good governance to protests against practices such as dowry, rape, domestic violence, food adulteration, and rising prices. Indicators such as the proportion of female voters and female representatives elected in successive general elections measure their participation in formal politics. Women constituted only 37 percent of the electorate in the first general election, and the electoral gender gap has gradually narrowed over the years, yet a significant gap remains.

Social, cultural, economic, and personal factors shape women's representation in politics, with the socioeconomic status of women's families, levels of education, family encouragement, and personality all influencing candidacy. Since independence, the percentage of female members of the Lok Sabha has consistently remained below 10, indicating limited access to political office, disempowered decision-making capacity, inadequate autonomy in freedom of movement, restricted access to education and employment, insufficient exposure to media, and weak political participation. Domestic violence and subordinate social status for women persist even in the 21st century. Yet many legal provisions exist to create a favorable environment (ROY, 2016).

Acknowledgment

The author expresses sincere gratitude to all those who contributed directly and indirectly to the successful completion of this research paper titled "Women's Political Participation and Democratic

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Empowerment in India." Special thanks are extended to scholars, researchers, and institutions whose published works and insights provided valuable guidance in understanding the historical, constitutional, and contemporary dimensions of women's political participation in India.

Financial support and sponsorship
Nil.

Conflicts of interest
The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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