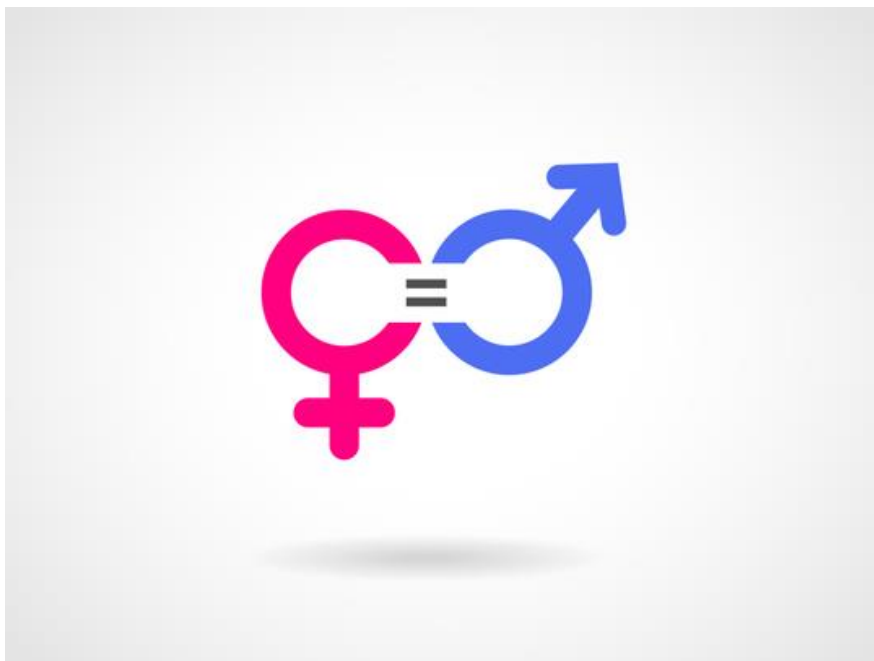


Where is women's participation in Indian politics?

India fares poorly in terms of women's representation in legislatures and parliament

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It is high time the political class reads the writing on the wall and walks the talk - ensuring better women's participation in Indian politics Image Credit: Supplied

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On 19 January 1966; leaders, workers of the Congress party and journalists began to gather outside the Parliament even as members of the Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) were casting their votes to elect a new Prime Minister to replace Lal Bahadur Shastri who had died two weeks ago in Tashkent.

The balloting was done by written vote, and the counting took more than four hours. As the crowd gathered outside the parliament house waited with bated breath, someone asked, “Is it a boy or a girl?”

‘It’s a girl’ the chief whip of the party announced dramatically to the waiting crowd. The girl was Indira Gandhi. She had trounced Morarji Desai by 355 to 169 votes to become the world’s most populous democracy’s first woman Prime Minister. In fact, till then the only other woman to head a national government was Sri Lanka’s Sirima Bandaranaike.

When India took the lead

The January 28, 1966 issue of the TIME magazine said ‘The idea of a woman Prime Minister strikes outsiders as more curious than it does most Indians. A woman is the chief minister of India’s fourth largest state. And women are moving into more and more executive positions in Indian business and government. Today there are no fewer than 59 women in India’s Parliament, v. only 12 in the US. Congress.’

In 1966, it was almost impossible even for seasoned democracies of the West to imagine a woman head of state. In fact, India’s first Parliament formed after the 1952 Lok Sabha election had about 5 per cent women parliamentarians. While this number was measly- and grossly underrepresented India’s women in the parliament with respect to their proportion in the country’s population, India was way ahead of the West.

Only 2% of the US House of Representatives and 3% of the UK’s parliament was female. Since then, the West has made rapid strides in women’s

representation in lawmaking bodies, while India's progress has been sluggish.

Today, India's Lok Sabha has 78 women MPs (14%), the highest tally ever. The number has almost tripled since 1952 but during the same period the number of women MPs has increased ten-fold in the UK Parliament and the US Congress, where as of January 2021 they account for 33.9% and 27.33% respectively.

Reduced women's representation

Data from the International Parliamentary Union (IPU) proves that India is not only faring poorly in terms of women's representation but more worryingly, its position has sharply declined in recent years. In January 1998, according to the IPU's rankings for women's representation in the lawmaking bodies, India was at the 95th position. It has now slipped to 148th position.

India's neighbours are doing much better — Afghanistan (71), China (86) Pakistan (116), are all placed above India in the latest rankings. The situation in India's state legislatures called the Vidhan Sabhas is not promising either. According to an ADR report published in 2018, only 9% out of a total of 4120 MLAs in India were female.

Ironically, even as women continue to be grossly underrepresented in India's Union Parliament and the state assemblies, the turnout of women voters has risen exponentially over the years. In 1971, women voter's turnout was just 46%, almost 16 percentage points less than the men's turnout.

In 2019 elections, the women's turnout exceeded the turnout of male voters—only marginally but for the first time ever in India's electoral history. In the 1960s, India's Sex Ratio of Voters (SRV)—the number of female voters per 1,000 male voters who actually cast their vote was 715.

THE RANKING

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According to a study by Mudit Kapoor and Shamik Ravi, authors of Women voters in *Indian democracy: A silent revolution*, by 2019 India's SRV had risen to 928. Surveys have proven that contrary to the popular belief women vote independently and do not meekly surrender to the whims and fancies of the patriarchs of the family while casting their vote.

As a consequence, political parties are going hammer and tongs to woo the women voters- who have emerged as a new, influential 'vote-bank'.

More women are queuing up outside polling booths for casting their ballots but the number of women lawmakers in India's law making bodies continues to be abysmally low. So, why is it that despite the emergence of women as agents of change with potential to swing elections, women continue to be criminally underrepresented in India's elected chambers?

It is simply because political parties and their leaders who rarely let go of an opportunity to portray themselves as champions of women's empowerment are hesitant to field women candidates in Lok Sabha as well as state assembly elections. Nine out of ten candidates in seventeen Lok Sabha elections since 1952 have been men.

The state of the state assemblies is even more disappointing- Prannoy Roy and Dorab Sopariwala mention in their book *The Verdict* that even in the best phase for women candidates (2002-2019), only one in twelve candidates (8 per cent) in assembly elections have been women. Ironically, parties are reluctant to give tickets to women candidates despite women candidates

having a proven better winning strike rate than men in Lok Sabha as well as state assembly elections since 1952.

For the world's largest democracy which has had a woman Prime minister, a woman President and several women chief ministers, this discrimination against women in politics, a by-product of the deeply entrenched patriarchy in the society is deeply disturbing and disgraceful.

The revolutionary 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments which reserved 33% seats in local government bodies is a model that ought to be replicated at the national level.

Increasing the number of women lawmakers

Nitai Mehta, Managing Trustee, Praja foundation -- a NGO -- known for releasing report cards evaluating the work of elected representatives of Mumbai and Delhi and for its efforts to transform urban governance across the country, says, "When reservations were brought in many states for the local self-governing institutions there were some speculations on the impact that it might have on the quality of deliberations in the house.

However, we can now see with strong data emerging from our 7 councillor report cards spread across 3 terms that the women councillors are now outperforming their male counterparts consistently. We hope now that our political leaders take inspiration from the data and work towards ways to increase the number of women lawmakers."

However, lack of expertise in matters relating to administration and policy-making; lack of knowledge about local governance acts, rules and regulations; the indifferent attitude of officials coupled with the patriarchy of the predominantly male administrative machinery does create hurdles for women representatives. But to overcome these hurdles various NGOs, policy think tanks have come up with different initiatives.

For instance, the Praja foundation has organised several capacity building programmes and ER workshops for women councillors. The workshops are designed to fit the needs and expectations of newly elected women councillors.

Speaking about these efforts, Balwant Kirar, Program Manager at Praja says, “In order to empower women councillors, Praja gives a special emphasis on the Capacity Building of women elected representatives. The overall aim of the workshops is to empower and build the capacity of women councillors for effective and accountable management of their wards. Women representatives have benefited immensely from these initiatives.”

The lessons learnt from the implementation of reservation for women in local bodies makes a strong case for reviving the Women’s Reservation Bill, 2008. For the record, both the Congress and the BJP had promised in their 2019 (and 2014) manifestos to pass the bill.

It is high time the political class reads the writing on the wall and walks the talk - ensuring better women’s participation in Indian politics. Reservation is no panacea which will completely end the deeply-rooted gender bias in India’s sociopolitical set-up but it is necessary to at least make a start and passing the Women’s Reservation Bill will be the ideal way to start.

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