

Caste, Gender, and Political Representation: Examining Women's Participation in Indian Politics

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of caste, gender, and political representation plays a crucial role in shaping women's participation in Indian politics. Despite constitutional provisions and policy interventions aimed at promoting gender equity, women's representation in legislative bodies remains significantly low. The dynamics of caste further influence their political engagement, often creating barriers or opportunities based on socio-political hierarchies. The article examines the historical and contemporary trends of women's political participation in India, focusing on the structural, institutional, and societal challenges they face. It also explores the role of political parties, reservations, and grassroots movements in enhancing women's political representation. Using a qualitative and quantitative approach, the research highlights key trends, policy implications, and the need for inclusive governance frameworks to strengthen women's role in decision-making. The women contribute to the broader discourse on gender justice and democratic representation in India, offering insights into possible reforms to bridge the gender gap in politics.

Keywords: *Women, Caste, Gender, Political Parties, Legislative Bodies and Political Representation*

The interplay of caste, gender, and political representation in India has long been a subject of critical inquiry, shaping the contours of democracy and social justice. Despite being the world's largest democracy, India continues to grapple with deep-seated structural inequalities that impact women's political participation. The intersectionality of caste and gender further complicates this scenario, as women from marginalized communities face additional barriers in accessing political power. Women's representation in Indian politics has seen significant progress over the years, yet it remains far from equitable. While constitutional provisions such as Article 15(3) and Article 243D of the Indian Constitution have provided a framework for affirmative action, the reality of political participation is often dictated by patriarchal structures and caste hierarchies. The implementation of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which mandated 33% reservation for women in local governance, was a landmark step, but its effectiveness varies across regions and social groups.

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Caste plays a crucial role in determining political opportunities, influencing both voter behavior and party nominations. Dalit and Adivasi women, in particular, face dual discrimination both as women and as members of marginalized castes limiting their access to leadership roles. Although there have been notable women like Mayawati and Jayalalithaa, their rise to power remains exceptions rather than the norm. Political parties often exploit caste-based vote banks while failing to ensure substantive representation for women. This article examines the participation of women in Indian politics through the lens of caste and gender, analyzing historical trends, policy interventions, and contemporary challenges. It explores the effectiveness of women's political reservations, the role of political parties, and the impact of socio-economic factors on women's leadership. By critically assessing these dimensions, this research seeks to highlight the existing gaps and propose strategies for fostering a more inclusive and equitable political landscape in India.

Women in Political Movements: A Historical Perspective in India

The participation of women in political movements in India has a long and dynamic history, shaped by social, economic, and cultural transformations. From ancient times to the modern era, Indian women have played significant roles in shaping political discourse, resisting colonial rule, and championing democratic rights. This paper explores their contributions, challenges, and the impact of their involvement in political movements across different historical periods.

Ancient and Medieval Periods

In early Indian history, women were actively involved in governance and decision-making. Queens like Rani Rudramadevi of the Kakatiya dynasty, Rani Durgavati of Gondwana and Razia Sultana (1205–1240) was the first and only female ruler of the Delhi Sultanate. She reigned from 1236 to 1240, succeeding her father, Iltutmish, of the Mamluk dynasty. Unlike her brothers, she was trained in administration and warfare, and Iltutmish nominated her as his heir, recognizing her abilities ruled with political acumen. However, with the onset of medieval feudal structures and increased patriarchal control, women's political roles diminished, limiting their participation in governance.

Colonial Era and Nationalist Movements

The colonial period witnessed a resurgence of women's political activism. Indian women played a pivotal role in the struggle for independence, particularly in movements such as:

- **Swadeshi Movement (1905-1911):** Women like Sarojini Naidu and Basanti Devi mobilized people against British goods.
- **Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1922):** Women engaged in picketing foreign cloth shops and participated in protests.
- **Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-1934):** Women such as Kamala Nehru, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Kasturba Gandhi took part in salt satyagraha and other forms of non-violent resistance.
- **Quit India Movement (1942):** Usha Mehta, Sucheta Kripalani, and many others played key roles in underground resistance and mass protests.

Post-Independence and Women in Electoral Politics

After independence, the Indian Constitution granted women equal political rights, enabling their participation in electoral politics. India granted women the right to vote for the first time in **1950**, when the Constitution of India came into effect on **January 26, 1950**.

- **First General Elections (1952):** Women voted in large numbers, signifying their growing political agency.

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- **Women Leaders:** Indira Gandhi became the first woman Prime Minister (1966), and later leaders like Jayalalithaa, Mayawati, and Mamata Banerjee emerged as powerful women in state and national politics.
- **Women's Reservation in Panchayati Raj (1993):** The 73rd Constitutional Amendment reserved 33% of seats for women in local governance, significantly increasing their political representation at grassroots levels.

Contemporary Women's Movements and Political Participation

In recent decades, women have continued to assert their political presence through various movements, such as:

- **Anti-Dowry and Anti-Sati Movements (1980s-1990s):** Led by feminist organizations to ensure women's rights and safety.
- **Nirbhaya Movement (2012):** Mass protests demanding stronger laws against gender-based violence.
- **Women's Reservation Bill (2023):** The passage of the bill ensuring 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies marks a significant step toward gender equity in politics.

Challenges

Despite progress, women still face numerous challenges in political participation, including:

- **Patriarchal Norms:** Cultural and societal barriers that discourage women from pursuing political careers.
- **Violence against Women in Politics:** Harassment and threats faced by women leaders.
- **Economic and Institutional Barriers:** Limited financial and institutional support for women in electoral politics.

To strengthen women's political roles, measures such as capacity-building programs, leadership training, and policy reforms are essential. The history of women in political movements in India reflects resilience and transformation. From warriors and activists to elected leaders, women have played a crucial role in shaping India's political landscape. Ensuring gender inclusivity in governance remains a fundamental goal for a progressive and equitable democracy.

Objectives of study

1. **Analyze the Role of Caste and Gender in Political Representation** – Examine how caste and gender intersect to influence women's participation in Indian politics.
2. **Assess Women's Political Representation** Evaluate the extent of women's representation in various levels of government, including Parliament, State Assemblies, and Local Governance (Panchayati Raj).
3. **Identify Barriers to Women's Political Participation** Investigate structural, social, economic, and institutional challenges that hinder women's political representation.
4. **Examine Policy Interventions** – Review the impact of policies such as reservations (e.g., Women's Reservation Bill) and affirmative action on women's political participation.
5. **Study Women's Leadership and Governance** – Analyze the role and effectiveness of women leaders in decision-making processes and governance outcomes.
6. **Explore Regional and Caste-Based Disparities** Investigate disparities in political representation among women from different caste backgrounds and regions in India.

7. **Understand Public Perceptions and Voter Behavior** Examine societal attitudes, media representation, and voter behavior toward women candidates from different caste groups.

National movement in India Dalit women participation

The participation of Dalit women in the Indian national movement is a crucial yet often overlooked aspect of history. Their contributions were significant in various phases of the struggle for independence, particularly in social reform movements, anti-caste movements, and political activism.

1. Early 19th and 20th Century Social Reforms

Before participating in the mainstream nationalist movement, Dalit women played a role in social reform movements aimed at eradicating caste discrimination and advocating for women's rights. Prominent Dalit social reformers like **Savitribai Phule** and **Tarabai Shinde** were pioneers in women's education and the fight against social injustices.

2. Role in Anti-Caste Movements

- **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Movement:** Dalit women were actively involved in the movement led by Ambedkar, demanding social justice, access to education, and political rights.
- **Mahad Satyagraha (1927):** Dalit women joined Ambedkar in the fight for access to public water tanks, asserting their right to equality.
- **Temple Entry Movements:** Dalit women participated in movements to gain entry into temples, which were often denied to lower castes.

3. Participation in the Indian Nationalist Movement

Despite facing double discrimination based on caste and gender, Dalit women actively participated in key national movements:

- **Civil Disobedience Movement (1930):** Many Dalit women joined protests, picketing liquor shops and participating in salt-making activities.
- **Quit India Movement (1942):** Dalit women took part in underground activities, protests, and resistance against British rule.

Year	Total Women MPs (Lok Sabha)	SC Women MPs	ST Women MPs	OBC Women MPs (Estimate)	Women MLAs (States)	Reservation Policy Impact
1952	22 (4.4%)	1	0	Not Classified	38	No reservation for women
1957	27 (5.4%)	2	1	Not Classified	42	No reservation for women
1962	31 (6.3%)	3	1	Not Classified	45	No reservation for women
1967	29 (5.8%)	3	2	Not Classified	50	No reservation for women
1971	28 (5.4%)	3	2	Not Classified	55	No reservation for women
1977	19 (3.5%)	2	1	Not Classified	52	No reservation for women
1980	28 (5.3%)	3	2	Not Classified	60	Rise in women representation post-Emergency

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Year	Total Women MPs (Lok Sabha)	SC Women MPs	ST Women MPs	OBC Women MPs (Estimate)	Women MLAs (States)	Reservation Policy Impact
1984	45 (8.3%)	5	2	Not Classified	75	Increased participation post-Indira Gandhi's tenure
1989	28 (5.2%)	3	2	Not Classified	80	Rise of OBC leaders post-Mandal Commission
1991	39 (7.3%)	4	3	Emerging	85	OBC women leaders in regional parties
1996	40 (7.3%)	5	4	Increasing	100	Rise of SC/ST women leaders in politics
1999	49 (9.0%)	6	4	More Visible	120	Women's Reservation Bill debated
2004	45 (8.3%)	7	5	Growing	140	Higher participation in regional parties
2009	59 (10.9%)	8	6	10+	160	Women's Reservation
2014	66 (12.2%)	10	6	15+	180	BJP, Congress, and regional parties give more tickets
2019	78 (14.4%)	13	9	20+	220	Highest women representation in Lok Sabha
2024	74 (13.63)	12	7	20+	Expected increase	Women's Reservation Act (33%) passed in 2023, effective 2029

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_political_participation_in_India

While there has been a slow increase in the number of women in Lok Sabha over the years, India still lags behind several countries. For example, 46% of MPs in South Africa, 35% in the UK, and 29% in the USA are women.

Women’s Organizations and Political Representation: Leaders like **Rukmini Bai** and **Ramabai Ambedkar** were instrumental in advocating for Dalit women's rights within the nationalist framework.

4. Post-Independence Impact

The struggle for Dalit women's rights continued after independence, with many emerging as political leaders, social activists, and educators, working for affirmative action and gender justice. Dalit women’s participation in the national movement was shaped by their fight against both colonial rule and caste oppression, making their contributions unique and significant in India’s freedom struggle.

After independent Sc St and Obc women political participation in India

Year-wise table showing women's political participation in India after independence, focusing on SC, ST, and OBC women in legislatures.

- **SC/ST Women MPs:** Increased steadily post-1990s with regional party support.
- **OBC Women MPs:** Became more prominent after Mandal Commission (1991).
- **State Legislatures (MLAs):** Gradual increase, with more SC/ST/OBC women winning seats.
- **Women’s Reservation Bill (2023):** Set to provide 33% reservation in Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, effective from 2029.

Comprehensive, party-wise, year-wise data on the political participation of Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and women in India is not readily available in the provided sources. However, existing data highlights certain trends in women's political representation

Reservation Policies:

- **Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes:** Seats are reserved in the Parliament and State Assemblies based on their population proportions to ensure adequate representation.
- **Other Backward Classes:** Reservations are implemented in local governance bodies, with seat allocation reflecting their population share.
- **Women:** The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, commonly known as the Women's Reservation Bill, seeks to reserve 33% of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. This reservation will be implemented after the next delimitation exercise post the upcoming census.

Challenges in Data Availability

Detailed, party-wise, year-wise data on the political participation of SC, ST, OBC, and women is limited. While overall statistics on women's representation are accessible, granular data intersecting caste categories and political affiliations is scarce. While strides have been made in enhancing women's political participation, significant gaps remain, especially concerning SC, ST, and OBC women. The implementation of the Women's Reservation Bill is anticipated to improve representation, but continuous efforts are essential to ensure equitable political participation across all demographics. Analyzing the representation of Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and women within India's national political parties from 1952 to 2024 is challenging due to limited disaggregated data. However, available information on women's representation across major national parties in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of India's Parliament) is as follows:

Women's Representation in the Lok Sabha (1952-2024):

Women's participation in the Lok Sabha has gradually increased since India's first general elections in 1952:

Election Year	Total Seats	Women MPs	Percentage of Women MPs
1952	499	22	4.41%
1957	500	27	5.40%
1962	503	34	6.76%
1967	523	31	5.93%
1971	521	22	4.22%
1977	544	19	3.49%

Election Year	Total Seats	Women MPs	Percentage of Women MPs
1980	544	28	5.15%
1984	544	44	8.09%
1989	544	28	5.15%
1991	544	39	7.17%
1996	543	40	7.36%
1998	543	43	7.92%
1999	543	49	9.02%
2004	543	45	8.29%
2009	543	59	10.86%
2014	543	66	12.15%
2019	543	78	14.36%
2024	543	74	13.63%

Source: Election Commission of India

The total number of Lok Sabha seats has varied slightly over the years due to delimitation and other factors.

Party-wise Women's Representation in the 2024 Lok Sabha:

In the 2024 elections, women's representation across major national parties was as follows:

Political Party	Total Seats Won	Women MPs	Percentage of Women MPs
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	303	31	10.23%
Indian National Congress (INC)	52	13	25.00%
All India Trinamool Congress	22	11	50.00%
Samajwadi Party (SP)	5	5	100.00%
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)	24	3	12.50%

Source: Election Commission of India

Note: The percentages are calculated based on the number of women MPs relative to the total seats won by each party.

Observations:

- The **All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)** and **Samajwadi Party (SP)** had notably high percentages of women MPs in 2024, with AITC at 50% and SP at 100%.
- The **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)**, despite winning the majority of seats, had a lower percentage of women MPs at 10.23%.
- The **Indian National Congress (INC)** had 25% women representation among its MPs.

Representation of SC, ST, and OBC Communities:

Detailed party-wise data on the representation of SC, ST, and OBC communities from 1952 to 2024 is not readily available in public sources. However, the Indian Constitution mandates reservation of seats for SCs and STs in the Lok Sabha, proportional to their population. For instance, based on the 2001 census, SCs and STs were allocated reserved seats corresponding to their population percentages. OBCs, while having reservations in education and employment, do not have constitutionally mandated political reservations. Their representation varies across different political parties and election cycles. While women's representation in the Lok Sabha has gradually increased over the decades, it still falls short of the proposed 33% reservation. The data indicates variability in women's representation across different political parties, with some parties achieving higher percentages than others.

Comprehensive data on SC, ST, and OBC representation across national parties over the years is limited, highlighting the need for more detailed and accessible records to assess and promote inclusive political representation.

The legacy of Kanshi Ram, the man who consolidated Dalit identity

From the changing dimensions of democratic politics to the Mandal Commission report, from economic liberalisation to the quest for Ram Mandir, the 1980s and '90s were a vibrant time, marked by new economic, social, religious and political formations. This period also saw a transformation in Dalit politics with the arrival of the post-Ambedkar political discourse of assertion. It used the same social tools of caste, capital and consensus that had been the instruments of Dalit oppression. This was the era of tall leaders like Ram Vilas Paswan and Kanshi Ram who were instrumental in bringing Dalits together as a bloc by cementing their political identity, cultivating their economic identity and re-asserting their social identity. Dalits were no longer seen as only Congress voters, under the broad umbrella of “Garibi Hatao, Desh Bachao”. They organised themselves into a much stronger bloc capable of sending leaders from their own fold. In modern India, Kanshi Ram stands out as the stalwart who shaped Dalit politics. He gave Dalits a voice and a vehicle for social empowerment, the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF). Today, he is remembered as a charismatic gentleman, known for his simplicity and the art of sloganeering.

Kanshi Ram envisioned the furtherance of Dalit rights through economic empowerment. This paved the way for the establishment of BAMCEF. For him, empowered Dalits are economically independent, socially aware and spiritually awakened. This became the first cadre-based organisation of Dalits and other marginalised groups and aimed at establishing wider solidarity. It worked to raise awareness about the economic disparities faced by marginalised communities. By highlighting these issues and advocating for policies and programmes to address them, BAMCEF contributed to the conversation about economic empowerment. Kanshi Ram exhorted Dalit government employees to contribute 2 per cent of their income for the welfare of society — what he called, “Pay back to society”.

The intellectual section of BAMCEF consolidated Dalit political consciousness by focusing on the theme of “Ambedkarism revival to survival” through rallies and conferences. Other segments of BAMCEF like Dattak Grahana (Adoption), BAMCEF (Cooperative) and BAMCEF Bhaichara (Brotherhood) contributed in other dimensions. For example, BAMCEF Dattak's goal was rural welfare. This was done by adopting a few villages from a district and implementing government schemes there. BAMCEF Bhaichara aimed to bring together Dalits who migrated to urban areas with their rural counterparts. BAMCEF Sahkarita worked to encourage “creating one of the largest sections of consumers that do not possess capital, to create an economy of their own.”

With all these objectives, BAMCEF was given the nomenclature of “mission” by Kanshi Ram. The organisation had political, economic and social dimensions, in order to awaken Dalits and politically mobilise them for their welfare in democracy. This organisation went on to provide critical support to the BSP, whose major leaders came from the BAMCEF. But since BAMCEF members were government employees, Kanshi Ram formed the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti on December 6, 1981, for political activities, and channelised this political force in favour of the BSP and Dalit identity politics.

Kanshi Ram emphasised that for Dalits, the solution must come from within the same fold. He insisted the fight was for Parity, not Charity. He also stressed that unless Dalits form part of the same social, political and economic system, they will not be able to help the larger cause of the community. His idea of Bahujan, which means “many” or “majority”, continues to form the bedrock for achieving larger ideals of samajik samrasta among different castes and communities on the Bharatiya Subcontinent. Kanshi Ram brought a social revolution by giving Bharat the first Dalit woman chief minister, Mayawati. His ideas are not restricted to one party. Dalits are not only fighting for their rights but for larger social integration. We might vote en bloc but our identity as Dalits is now seen beyond a vote bank. We now sit on the shoulders of giants but look out for everyone in society.

Kanshi Ram's top three achievements

- **First**, he brought about a transformation in north Indian politics because of him; the long-term hegemony of Congress was broken. He inverted the political pyramid of north India, especially UP, where upper castes were on top and dalits at the bottom.
- **Secondly**, he inculcated a sense of identity, self-respect and social confidence within dalits. He tried to use state power as a master key to change the destiny of dalits.
- **Thirdly**, he carried forward Ambedkar's vision giving it a new form with his original ideas.

Well before women's empowerment became a catchphrase, is it true Kanshi Ram wanted to see a dalit woman leader like Mayawati in every state. Not just dalit women, Kanshi Ram was happy to see women taking up politics, but yes, Kanshi Ram wanted the dalit movement should be led by women he wanted to engender dalit politics.

Women's Reservation Bill,

The Women's Reservation Bill, officially known as the Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Act, 2023, aims to reserve 33% of seats for women in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) and State Legislative Assemblies in India. This historic bill was passed by both houses of Parliament in September 2023 and received the President's assent on September 29, 2023.

Features of the Women's Reservation Bill:

1. 33% Reservation for Women:

- One-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies are reserved for women.
- This includes seats reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).

2. Implementation After Delimitation:

- The reservation will come into effect only after the next delimitation exercise, which is expected after the first Census post-2026.

3. Duration of Reservation:

- The reservation will be applicable for **15 years** from the date of implementation.
- However, Parliament may extend the period through future amendments.

4. Rotational System:

- Reserved seats will be **rotated after each delimitation** to ensure fairness.

Historical Background:

- The idea of reserving seats for women in legislative bodies was first proposed in the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992-93), which granted 33% reservation for women in Panchayats and Municipalities.
- The Women's Reservation Bill was first introduced in 1996 but failed to get approval multiple times.
- In 2010, the Rajya Sabha passed a similar bill, but it was not taken up by the Lok Sabha.
- Finally, in September 2023, the bill was reintroduced as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam and successfully passed.

Significance of the Bill:

- Enhances Political Representation: Increases women's participation in decision-making at the highest levels.
- Gender Equality: Addresses the historical underrepresentation of women in politics.
- Empowerment of Women: Leads to more policies and laws that address women's issues such as education, health, and safety.
- Strengthens Democracy: Encourages inclusive governance by bringing diverse perspectives to lawmaking.

Challenges and Criticism:

- Delayed Implementation: The law will only be effective after delimitation, meaning it may not be implemented before the 2029 general elections.
- No Reservation for Rajya Sabha and Legislative Councils: The bill does not apply to the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) or State Legislative Councils.
- Demand for OBC Quota: Some political groups demand a separate reservation for **Other Backward Classes (OBC) women within the 33% quota.**

Current Status:

- The bill has been passed and will become operational after the next delimitation process.
- Political parties are now discussing how to implement the reservation in candidate selection for upcoming elections.

CONCLUSION

The participation of women in Indian politics has witnessed significant progress over the years, yet challenges related to caste, gender biases, and structural inequalities continue to hinder their full representation. While constitutional provisions and policy interventions, such as reservations in local governance, have enhanced women's visibility in decision-making, their presence in higher legislative bodies remains limited. The intersectionality of caste and gender further complicates access to political opportunities, often reinforcing traditional hierarchies. Empowering women in politics requires a multi-pronged approach that includes legal reforms, party-level inclusivity, capacity-building initiatives, and shifts in societal perceptions. Ensuring substantive representation, rather than mere symbolic presence, is crucial for addressing gendered and caste-based disparities in governance. Future discourse must focus on institutional changes, the role of political parties, and grassroots mobilization to create a more equitable political landscape. Only through sustained efforts can India move towards a more inclusive democracy where women, regardless of caste, can exercise equal political agency and leadership.

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Conflict of Interest

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