The Involvement Of Women In Politics And Political Empowerment Of Women Through The Ages

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Abstract:

In this study an attempt has been made to explore the historical and contemporary involvement of women in Indian politics, charting their journey from the pre-independence era to present times. Using a historical research methodology, archival records, legislations, and scholarly articles were analysed to track the trajectory of women's political participation. The study finds that women played pivotal roles in the Indian freedom struggle with leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Sucheta Kriplani marking their presence. Post-independence, while the Indian Constitution endorsed gender equality, the actual political representation of women remained limited due to various socio-cultural barriers. Decades later, women like Indira Gandhi began to influence national politics, with the 73rd and 74th Amendments acting as significant milestones by advocating for reserving 33% of seats for women in local governance. Contemporary leaders like Mamata Banerjee and Mayawati further solidified women's roles in politics. However, challenges persist, notably in the areas of women's safety and adequate representation in Parliament. The future prospects for women in politics seem promising with the rise of education, technology, and societal shifts, but a genuine transformation requires systemic interventions beyond mere tokenism.

INTRODUCTION

The involvement and influence of women in India's politics offer a narrative rich in history, challenges, and progress. From the fiery women of the pre-independence era, whose participation marked crucial milestones in the freedom struggle, to the modern-day leaders shaping the nation's future, the political landscape of India has been significantly impacted by its female figures.[1] However, the journey of women in Indian politics is not merely a linear progression; it's layered with intricate socio-cultural fabric where elements like caste, religion, and regionalism interplay, often acting as impediments or, at times, catalysts. Legal frameworks, notably the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, highlight the nation's attempt to institutionalise women's representation and affirm their role in the governance structure.[2] Yet, it's essential to scrutinise the depth of this representation, from grassroots Panchayats to the august houses of Parliament, and discern whether numeric representation translates to influential policymaking and genuine social change. As India stands on the cusp of a new era, understanding the past and present trajectories of women's political empowerment becomes imperative, not just as a reflection on progress made but as a blueprint for a more equitable future. The study aims to provide a holistic view of women's political involvement in India, exploring its history, challenges, achievements, and the potential for the future.

Research Objectives

The study aims to explore the journey of women in Indian politics from the pre-independence era to present times, analyse the legal frameworks bolstering their representation, getting into the socio-cultural factors influencing their political involvement, evaluate their presence and influence across political hierarchies, and ponder upon the future dynamics of women's political empowerment amidst evolving societal trends and efforts towards gender parity.

Methodology

In this study, a historical research methodology was employed. Primary and secondary sources, including archival records, legislations, and scholarly articles, were analyzed to trace the trajectory of women's political involvement in India. The approach provided a contextual understanding, discerning patterns, challenges, and evolutions across different periods in the nation's political landscape.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

India's political realm has always been a complex tapestry, intertwining historical, social, and cultural contexts. Amidst this complex web, women's involvement stands out as a significant theme that has undergone notable evolution from the pre-independence era to the present day. The journey, however, has been both inspiring and fraught with challenges. Historical texts often reminisce about India's fight for independence, but a closer analysis reveals that women were not mere footnotes. The beginning of the 20th century saw women stepping out of their confined domestic spaces and asserting their presence in the freedom struggle.[3] Leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Sucheta Kriplani, and Aruna Asaf Ali are testament to this assertion. However, their participation was not a spontaneous occurrence. It was the outcome of early reform movements of the 19th century initiated by stalwarts like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. These reforms, which aimed to address issues like sati, child marriage, and women's education, set the groundwork for women to think beyond their conventional roles.

Post-independence, the newly framed Indian Constitution enshrined equality for all its citizens, irrespective of gender. This was a monumental step considering the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. But did this legislative equality translate into real political participation for women? For many years after independence, women's participation in politics remained relatively limited. The reasons were manifold. While women had actively participated in the freedom struggle, post-independence politics was largely dominated by men.[4] Women found it challenging to make inroads, given the structural and societal impediments. However, the decades that followed witnessed a steady rise in women's political participation. Women like Indira Gandhi emerged as

prominent figures on the political horizon. Her leadership, while divisive, undeniably carved out space for women in Indian politics. Arguably, the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution in the 1990s proved to be watershed moments for women in Indian politics.[5] These amendments, by reserving 33% of seats for women in local governance bodies (Panchayats), provided women with a legitimate and substantial platform at the grassroots level. Women from rural areas, who were earlier relegated to the margins, now found a voice and began to participate actively in local governance. This move towards decentralisation played a pivotal role in dismantling the conventional barriers women faced. While the urban political elite still held the reins of power at the national level, the story was beginning to change at the village and district levels.

In the contemporary era, we witness women not just participating, but also leading and shaping the political discourse in India. Leaders such as Mamata Banerjee, Mayawati, and Jayalalithaa, and the president of India Droupadi Murmu among others, have shown that women can helm political movements and administer states with equal, prowess compared to their male counterparts.[6] Yet, challenges persist. Issues like women's safety, representation in Parliament, and gender-based prejudices remain areas of concern. The Women's Reservation Bill, which seeks to reserve 33% of seats in Parliament for women, has been pending for years, indicating the resistance to shared political space. The bill proposes to reserve 181 seats in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of Parliament) and 79 seats in the Rajya Sabha (the upper house of Parliament) for women.[7] Moreover, while women leaders are emerging, are they genuinely addressing women-centric issues or merely functioning within patriarchal frameworks? This remains a contentious issue and calls for deeper introspection.[8] India, with its rich history and vibrant democratic ethos, has been a focal point of societal and political evolution. While women's involvement in the nation's politics has always been palpable, their actual representation at various legislative levels has often been subdued. In the pursuit of fostering an inclusive democracy, the country embarked on several legislative and policy reforms.[9] The effectiveness and implications of these measures, especially the 73rd and

74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, remain subjects of intense debate.

In the annals of legislative advancements to address gender-based disparities, "The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005," enacted on 26th October 2006, stands out. Historically, this legislation is pioneering in recognizing a woman's intrinsic right to live in an environment devoid of violence. It introduces a holistic definition of domestic violence, underscores a woman's right to inhabit the communal domicile, delineates the reliefs to which she is entitled in instances of transgressions, and establishes an institutional mechanism to expedite her pursuit of justice and auxiliary services. This legislation signifies an inaugural move towards incorporating women's human rights within domestic precincts (Lawyer's Collective, Women's Rights Initiative 2007). Simultaneously, "The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005," effective from 9th September 2005, seeks to rectify patriarchal vestiges within the "Hindu Succession Act, 1956." This amendment expunges gendered biases, ensuring egalitarian inheritance rights for daughters, akin to their male counterparts, encompassing even agricultural territories.

Besides, "The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005," which was institutionalized on 2nd February 2006 in an initial 200 districts, pledges to span the entirety of rural India in subsequent five years. Its cardinal objective is the augmentation of livelihood resilience in rural regions by assuring a minimum of 100 wage-earning days annually to every household volunteering for unskilled labour. This initiative is pivotal for the sustainable trajectory of agrarian economies. By emphasising projects mitigating persistent impoverishment triggers — such as droughts, deforestation, and soil degradation — this Act endeavours to fortify the agrarian foundational resources while constructing long-lasting assets in the hinterlands. Notably, the Act mandates that a minimum of one-third of its beneficiaries comprise women who have formally registered for labour, with essential on-site provisions including crèches, potable water, and shade (NREGA 2008).

Historically, the role of Indian women was primarily confined to the private sphere, limited by deep-rooted socio-cultural norms and patriarchal structures. However,

post-independence, India promised a new dawn.[10] The Constitution, which assured equality for all its citizens, kindled hope in millions of women, offering a vision of a nation where they could play an active role in the political arena. Introduced in the early 1990s, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts marked significant milestones in this journey. Their primary aim was decentralisation, envisioning a more representative local governance system. A salient feature of these amendments was the reservation of 33% of seats for women in Panchayats and urban local bodies. On the surface, this appeared to be a revolutionary step.[11] For the first time, many women could engage with the intricacies of governance, decision-making, and administration. Several states, taking the spirit of these amendments further, even increased the reservation to 50%. This move ensured women's representation skyrocketed at local levels, infusing diverse perspectives into local politics.[12] From 1951 to 1975, women's roles in the public and leadership domains largely remained obscured, with prevailing societal tendencies leaning towards a welfarist approach. However, with the advent of the International Women's Year and the UN Decade for Women, there was a renewed focus on women's status in India. Two seminal documents emerged during this period: 'Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on Status of Women in India' and a discourse on 'Indian Women' presented at the UN World Conference in Mexico. Subsequently, a bureau was instituted to address women's issues, which has since evolved into the Ministry of Women and Development.

The Fifth Plan (1974-78) marked a pivotal transition from the welfarist stance to one that centred on women's development. This shift can be attributed to the 'Committee on Status of Women Report 1974' which underscored the adverse impacts of certain developmental initiatives on women. Central to this plan was the ambition to attain educational equity to further the broader objective of social justice. There was a pronounced push for increased enrolment and retention in schools, especially in underdeveloped regions and among marginalised segments of society. Recognising the correlation between the dearth of female educators and lower enrolment of girls, scholarships were allocated to facilitate female students' completion of education, with an emphasis on pursuing

teaching roles (NPP 1988).[13] In 1977, the Integrated Child Development Services Scheme was launched nationwide. While primarily targeted towards children, the scheme catered to the health and nutrition needs of expectant and nursing mothers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (NPP 1988:102). This period also saw the formulation of the National Plan of Action (1976), pinpointing areas such as education, health, employment, nutrition, legislation, and social welfare to structure action programmes aimed at enhancing women's status (NPP 1988).

In the subsequent decades spanning 1981-2001, and over four plan periods, gender concerns were explicitly delineated in dedicated chapters. The Sixth Plan (1980-85) framed women's development as an economic imperative. Within the healthcare ambit, the sixth and seventh plans aimed at amplifying infrastructural facilities, bolstering the trained healthcare workforce, controlling communicable diseases, and accentuating maternal and child healthcare (NPP 1988). The multifaceted Sixth Plan advanced objectives spanning health, education, and employment for women. Until this juncture, the role of women had primarily been perceived within the confines of societal welfare. In contrast, the Seventh Plan (1985-90) endeavoured to position women at the heart of national developmental objectives. Emphasis was placed on fostering confidence among women, raising awareness of their legal rights, and equipping them for economic endeavours (NPP 1988). Moreover, the Women's Component Plan was introduced, creating a framework to identify and oversee initiatives directly benefiting women.[14] The ensuing Eighth Plan (1992-97) transitioned from a developmental paradigm to one of empowerment, with an increased budgetary allocation for women's programmes. Concurrently, the Ninth Plan (1997-2002) concentrated on achieving women's empowerment by integrating ongoing services in women-centric and women-related sectors. A notable strategy was the Women's Component Plan, ensuring that a minimum of 30% of resources from all development sectors were directed towards women.

The Tenth Plan (2002-2007) enshrined distinct strategies, policies, and programmes for the empowerment of women as instrumental agents of societal change, with its framework shaped by the National Policy on

Empowerment of Women 2001. The strategy incorporated three primary domains: social empowerment, economic empowerment, and gender justice. This plan envisaged the integration of the Women's Component Plan and Gender Budgeting to ensure both pre-emptive and corrective measures enabled women to access their rightful share from general development sectors. Furthermore, Gender Budgeting was adopted, not as a separate financial allocation for women, but as a comprehensive methodology for crafting gender-sensitive budgets and policies.[15] This approach was heralded by the Finance Ministry in the Union Budget 2005 to ascertain equitable resource distribution. Jain (2007) contended that merely incorporating a chapter on 'Women and Development' is insufficient for genuine inclusion. Jain advocated for the recognition of women in all facets of planning, thereby weaving the experiences and perspectives of women into diverse sectors like defence, science, and technology. The Eleventh Plan (2007-2012) reflected this sentiment, as a committee of feminist economists was constituted to guide gender-sensitive public resource allocation, thereby promoting gender equality and inclusive growth.

However, the other side of the coin presents a different story. Despite the increased representation, critics argue about the actual power these women representatives wielded. In numerous instances, despite being the elected representative, the actual decision-making was often commandeered by male members of their families, reducing women to mere proxies. Moreover, the challenges these women faced were multi-dimensional. From confronting age-old patriarchal mindsets to grappling with a lack of resources and training, the journey was far from smooth. This leads to a pertinent question: Does reservation, in isolation, guarantee genuine empowerment? Parallel to the debate on the 73rd and 74th amendments is the discourse around the Women's Reservation Bill. This proposed legislation, which seeks to reserve 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies for women, has been hanging in the balance for years. Advocates argue that such a bill could rectify the gender imbalance in higher legislative bodies, leading to more gender-sensitive policy-making. However, sceptics raise concerns about compromising on merit and the potential

misuse of such reservations by political parties to field women from influential backgrounds.[16]

Challenges and Opportunities

The political arena of India, given its sheer diversity, is rife with complexities. For women seeking to make their mark, these complexities manifest in the form of both challenges and opportunities, intricately woven into the country's socio-cultural fabric. Factors like caste, religion, and regionalism play pivotal roles, shaping the contours of their political journey.[17] The objective here is to explore these influences and the subsequent impact they have on the political aspirations and experiences of Indian women. At the outset, one must acknowledge the progress made since India's independence.[18] The nation has witnessed women leaders, both at state and central levels, who have left indelible marks on its political landscape. Yet, the overall percentage of women in politics remains disproportionately low. A closer examination reveals that socio-cultural factors significantly contribute to this disparity.[19]

Caste often acts as both a sword and a shield in the political careers of women. The deeply entrenched caste system, which historically was a marker of social status and occupation, now plays a crucial role in political mobilisation. For women hailing from historically marginalised castes, this can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, political parties, aiming to garner votes from specific communities, might propel women from these castes to the forefront. This token representation, however, often comes with its own set of challenges.[20] These women, despite holding positions of power, may not have the autonomy to make decisions, acting merely as figureheads. On the other hand, women from dominant castes might find it easier to ascend the political ladder due to the existing power dynamics. Yet, they too face challenges, as their political legitimacy is often reduced to their caste identity, undermining their individual capabilities.[21]

Religion, in a country as diverse as India, is another potent factor influencing the political trajectories of women. India has a rich tapestry of religions, each with its own set of cultural norms. Often, these norms dictate the role of women, limiting their public interactions.[22] For instance, women from certain religious backgrounds might

face resistance when seeking active roles in politics due to patriarchal interpretations of religious scriptures. However, religion can also act as a rallying point. Women, leveraging their religious identities, can mobilise communities and address issues specific to them, thereby creating a niche political space for themselves.[23] Regionalism, given India's vast geographic expanse, plays a distinctive role. Each region, with its unique culture, language, and history, offers different challenges and opportunities for women. For instance, regions with matrilineal societies, like parts of Kerala, might be more receptive to women leaders. In contrast, regions steeped in patriarchal traditions might offer more resistance. However, regionalism also allows women to capitalise on regional pride. By championing regional issues and showcasing an understanding of local concerns, women can garner significant support.[24]

While the aforementioned factors often pose challenges, they also offer a realm of opportunities. The very diversity that makes the political terrain challenging allows women to carve niches, mobilise specific groups, and champion unique causes.[25] For every caste or religious barrier, there's a potential for women to rise as leaders within those communities, addressing issues from within and effecting change. For every regional challenge, there's an opportunity for women to emerge as regional icons.

Case Studies

Jhalkaribai, a Dalit warrior in Rani Laxmibai's army during the 1857 Indian Rebellion, is a figure whose contributions straddle the line between history and legend. Advocates of her narrative argue that she played a pivotal role in the war, with tales of her bravery, especially acting as Rani Laxmibai's body double, ensuring the queen's safety. To many, she epitomises the often overlooked contributions of Dalit women in Indian history, highlighting the intersection of caste and gender-based oppression.[26] However, skeptics often raise concerns about the veracity of her tales, asking how much of her narrative is historically accurate versus embellished folklore. Some argue that her story has been amplified over time for symbolic resonance rather than historical fidelity. Regardless of where one stands, Jhalkaribai's story raises crucial questions about historical representation, emphasizing the importance of ensuring

that marginalised voices are not written out of national narratives.[27]

Mayawati's ascent to becoming the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh (UP) — India's most populous state — stands as an emblematic testimony to Dalit empowerment. As the national president of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), her political journey, from humble beginnings as a schoolteacher to one of India's most powerful political figures, is unprecedented.[28] Advocates of Mayawati commend her for providing a voice to the historically marginalised Dalit community, ensuring that issues of caste-based discrimination find a platform in the national discourse. Her reign in UP saw the construction of parks and monuments celebrating Dalit icons, reinforcing a sense of pride and identity among the oppressed.[29]

Phoolan Devi's life is one of the most intensely debated narratives in Indian politics. Known as the "Bandit Queen", her early life was marred by poverty, caste-based discrimination, and personal trauma.[30] Her descent into banditry was as much a tale of vengeance for personal wrongs as it was a revolt against the systemic oppression faced by low-caste women. Advocates view her as a symbol of resistance, a woman who, when pushed to the edge by societal norms and personal atrocities, fought back fiercely. Her transition to politics, culminating in her election as a Member of Parliament, is seen by many as a testament to her desire to effect change from within the system.[31]

Usha Ramanathan, widely recognised as an independent law researcher in India, is best known for her incisive critiques on India's Aadhaar project, data privacy, and other related socio-legal issues.[32] Advocates hail her as a beacon of civil liberties, who has consistently flagged concerns about potential misuse of personal data and the implications on privacy. Her rigorous academic work, paired with her activism, provides valuable insights, pushing for checks and balances in state-driven projects. However, her detractors view her as being overly sceptical, potentially hindering technological and administrative progress. They argue that in the digital age, data-driven governance can lead to more efficiency, and Ramanathan's critiques, while valuable, sometimes lean towards alarmism. Regardless of the perspective, Usha Ramanathan's role in shaping the discourse around data privacy and civil rights in India is

undeniable. Her voice is a crucial one, reminding the nation of the potential pitfalls of unchecked technological advancements.[33]

Manjula Pradeep has been a torchbearer for Dalit women's rights in Gujarat. Her activism, particularly as the director of the NGO Navsarjan Trust, has revolved around issues like caste-based discrimination, manual scavenging, and women's rights. Advocates view Pradeep as a fearless leader who gives a voice to the voiceless, addressing not only caste-based issues but also intersecting challenges faced by women within the Dalit community.[34] Yet, her vocal stance against deep-rooted societal structures has not been without criticism. Detractors argue that her approach can sometimes be divisive, focusing more on highlighting societal fractures rather than fostering unity and understanding. They believe that change can be brought about more effectively through dialogue and integration, rather than confrontation. Still, it's hard to deny the impact Manjula Pradeep has had on the ground. By bringing attention to often overlooked issues, she's challenged both societal norms and the status quo, pushing for a more inclusive Gujarat and India.[35]

As the president of the National Federation of Dalit Women, Ruth Manorama's name is synonymous with advocacy for lower caste women in India. Supporters laud her relentless pursuit of rights for Dalit women, tackling issues like discrimination, violence, and economic disparities.[36] Her activism, which earned her a Right Livelihood Award, showcases her commitment to elevating the voices of those at the intersection of caste and gender discrimination. Critics, however, argue that her focus is sometimes too narrow, potentially excluding other lower acstes groups from the discourse. They suggest that broader coalitions and more integrative approaches might yield better results than specific caste-based activism. Despite such critiques, Ruth Manorama's dedication to the upliftment of Dalit women is palpable.[37] Her work underscores the unique challenges faced by women in marginalised communities, highlighting the need for targeted interventions even within broader social justice movements.

Krishna Tirath, associated with the Indian National Congress, served as the Minister of State (Independent

Charge) for Women and Child Development. Under her tenure, she pursued various initiatives to promote gender equality, child protection, and women's empowerment. Supporters commend her for highlighting issues of women's rights at a national level, portraying her as a progressive figure within Indian politics.[38] However, critics often question the depth of her commitment, suggesting that her positions might have been more a result of political appointment rather than genuine advocacy. They also scrutinise the effectiveness of policies under her leadership, arguing about their practical implications and on-ground results.[39] While debates persist regarding her tenure's impact, Krishna Tirath's role in bringing women's issues to the political forefront is undeniable. It underscores the challenges and responsibilities that come with political appointments in crucial ministries.

The political realm of India presents an intriguing paradox when assessing the representation of women. From the grassroots level of Panchayats to the hallowed halls of the Parliament, the journey of women in politics has been rife with oscillations between empowerment and underrepresentation. This analysis aims to critically assess the representation of women across political echelons and delve into their influence on policy-making, governance, and instigating social change. Starting at the grassroots, India's Panchayati Raj institutions stand as a beacon of women's empowerment.[40] With the 73rd Constitutional Amendment ensuring a reservation of 33% for women in Panchayats, one could argue that a revolutionary step was taken towards inclusive governance. Indeed, many states took the spirit of the amendment further, elevating the reservation to 50%. With these mandates in place, women in rural India, often sidelined in the political narrative, found themselves at decision-making tables.[41] However, here's the rub: Does increased representation necessarily translate to genuine empowerment? Critics argue that the phenomenon of 'proxy women representatives', where elected women are mere stand-ins for their male relatives, undermines the very ethos of this reservation. Nevertheless, there's an undeniable ripple effect.[42] Even if a fraction of these women wield genuine power, they provide role models for others and incrementally challenge the entrenched patriarchy. Moving up the ladder to state assemblies and the Parliament, the narrative takes a slightly

disheartening turn. While Panchayats saw a significant surge in women's representation due to reservations, such mandates are conspicuously absent at higher legislative levels. The Women's Reservation Bill, which aims to reserve 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies for women, has been a point of contention and has yet to see the light of day. The result? A mere 14% of the Lok Sabha's members in 2019 were women. This paucity raises questions about the inclusivity of India's democracy.[43]

But numbers, while telling a part of the story, don't reveal the entire narrative. Those women who have managed to breach the barriers and secure positions at state and central levels have often displayed exemplary leadership. Whether it's formulating gender-sensitive policies, championing social causes, or giving voice to the marginalised, the impact of women in these roles is palpable.[44] However, there's a counter-argument to consider: Is the contribution of these women amplified because they are few and far between, or is it a genuine testament to the unique perspectives they bring to the table? One cannot discuss the impact of women in politics without addressing policy-making and governance. While it's a sweeping generalisation to say women inherently bring empathy and inclusivity to governance, there's evidence to support this notion. States led by women have often seen progressive policies, especially in sectors like education, health, and child welfare. Moreover, women politicians have been instrumental in bringing issues like maternal health, gender equality, and domestic violence to the forefront. On the broader canvas of societal change, the influence of women in political positions becomes even more profound. Their very presence in corridors of power challenges age-old norms. Policies aside, the symbolism of women in leadership roles sends a powerful message to society, laying the groundwork for broader acceptance of women in myriad roles.[45]

Future Prospects

The trajectory of women's political empowerment in India has been both intriguing and contentious, shaped by historical struggles, socio-political dynamics, and evolving societal norms. As we stand on the precipice of new decades, speculating on the future of women's political empowerment necessitates a careful examination of

emerging trends, shifts in attitudes, and ongoing endeavours.[46] The question at hand is whether India is on the brink of a renaissance in women's political participation or if the age-old barriers will persistently hinder progress. One of the most promising indicators for the future is the increasing educational attainment and professional success of women. As more women occupy significant positions in corporate, academic, and civil society sectors, the spill-over effect into politics seems inevitable. The argument here is that with increased financial independence and societal clout, women might be better poised to enter and navigate the murky waters of politics.[47] However, there's a counterpoint to consider. The world of politics, with its unique challenges and power dynamics, is vastly different from other professional spheres. Does success in one sector necessarily translate to a seamless transition into politics?

Another pivotal aspect is the ever-evolving societal attitudes towards gender roles. The past decades have witnessed a perceptible shift, especially in urban areas and among younger generations.[48] There's a growing acceptance, and indeed an expectation, for women to participate actively in all societal domains. Grassroots movements, increased awareness through media, and global feminist waves have contributed to this shift. Yet, the challenge remains. Rural India, which constitutes a significant portion of the electorate, is still largely under the grip of traditional norms. Can urban momentum influence and expedite change in rural mindsets, or will the disparity continue to widen? Technology and social media also play crucial roles in this narrative. With platforms that amplify voices and create spaces for discourse, women can now engage in political dialogues, mobilise support, and challenge established norms more effectively. Moreover, these platforms have made politics more accessible, allowing women to bypass traditional gatekeepers. However, the digital realm is a double-edged sword.[49] Alongside its empowering potential, it has also been a breeding ground for misogyny, online harassment, and targeted campaigns against women in public spheres. The debate here revolves around whether the benefits of online platforms outweigh their pitfalls.

Efforts to promote gender equality in political spheres are undeniably gaining traction. The discourse

around the Women's Reservation Bill, the successes of women-centric political campaigns, and the increasing visibility of women politicians are positive signs. But for genuine transformation to occur, systemic interventions are essential. Piecemeal solutions or mere tokenism won't suffice.[50] For instance, while reservation policies at the Panchayat level have increased numerical representation, have they genuinely translated to empowerment and decision-making agency? The future trajectory will depend on how India addresses such core issues. Besides, the role of political parties cannot be understated. Their willingness to field women candidates, invest in their capacity building, and provide them with significant portfolios will be instrumental. While some parties have taken progressive steps, there's a need for collective and consistent efforts across the board. In synthesising the above points, the trajectory of women's political empowerment in India seems to be at an inflection point. The optimist would argue that with the confluence of education, evolving societal norms, technology, and proactive policies, the future is bright.[51] However, the sceptic might point out that deep-rooted patriarchal structures, societal inertia, and the unique challenges of the political domain could stymie rapid progress. What remains clear is that the journey ahead, while promising, will demand sustained efforts, introspection, and a commitment to reshaping the political setting in favour of genuine gender equality.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of women in Indian politics, transitioning from the shadows of pre-independence to integral roles today, illustrates a remarkable journey, albeit fraught with challenges. As the nation strides into the 21st century, it is pivotal that women, who make up half of its demographic, are at the forefront of sculpting its political trajectory. Noteworthy legislative frameworks, such as the 73rd and 74th amendments, have paved avenues for women in the political arena. However, the quest for authentic empowerment is multifaceted, demanding not just statutory provisions but also enrichment through education, resources, and the deconstruction of deep-seated societal barriers. The intricate nexus between politics and the multifarious dimensions of caste, religion, and regionalism offers both impediments and opportunities

for Indian women. While constitutional provisions have bolstered female representation at grassroots governance, the higher echelons still remain largely uncharted territories for them. Nevertheless, their undeniable influence in policy-making, governance, and reshaping societal perspectives underscores the need for a discourse that transcends mere numerical representation. As India oscillates between tradition and contemporaneity, enhancing women's political participation is imperative not just for representational parity but to mould the nation's ethos and trajectory.

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