



Review paper

From social reform to political power: tracing women's participation in India through Ramabai and Shinde's lens

Sanjana Sengar

Amity Institute of Social Science, Amity University, UP, Noida, India
sengarsanjana02@gmail.com

Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 5th March 2026, revised 25th March 2026, accepted 10th April 2026

Abstract

In this research paper, the historical and modern experience of women in politics in India has been discussed starting with the social reform era that started in the nineteenth century up to the democratic system that is currently present. The major research question of the paper is to discuss the impact of early reformers such as Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde on the destabilization of patriarchal systems and the way their thoughts led to the gradual increase in women political rights. Despite the current high turnout of women in India as voters and in local governments, a discrepancy is visible as women are represented in the numbers but not actually exercising their influence in the decision-making process. The study uses descriptive and qualitative approach. It relies primarily on secondary sources, such as government documents, academic books, research papers, historical writings, and documents of the constitution. The theoretical interpretation and historical studies connect the study between the ideas of reformist feminism and the present political reality in India. The key findings of the study indicate that social movements of reform played a significant role in shaping the political consciousness and awareness of women. Even so, the real empowerment is undermined by the institutional barriers such as patriarchy, socioeconomic disparity, and a limited access to political resources. The contribution of this work is that it highlights the necessity to transform formal representation into substantive political power and relates the ideas of early feminism with the modern-day political participation.

Keywords: Women's Political Participation; Feminist Thought in India; Gender and Politics; Pandita Ramabai; Tarabai Shinde; Political Representation; Democratic Participation.

Introduction

The political involvement of women in India has been a long historical process that has been influenced by social reform, nationalism and constitutional democracy¹. The Indian society in the nineteenth century was quite patriarchal and women were mostly restricted to domestic chores. They were poorly educated, had no political rights and had little property or decision-making control. The unequal status of women was manifested in such social practices as child marriage, deprivation of widow rights, limitations on education, etc. This was the time when a number of social reformers started doubting this practice and uplifted women. The reform movements created the platform through which women could be educated and create social awareness which was to be used as the base in political participation. The works of such authors as Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde were particularly significant in disputing the conventional gender expectations. They condemned the patriarchal society and ensured that women were given respect and equality through their writings and activism. The fact that their work was primarily social reform indirectly impacted the political awareness of women.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, women started to take part in the national movement, take part in protests, boycotts, and mass actions. Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant were the leaders, who proved that women could be active participants of the political struggle. The Constitution of India had ensured universal adult franchise after independence whereby women were given equal voting rights at the inception of the Republic. This was a big move as opposed to most of the western democracies where women were given the right to vote much later. Although these have been attained, the issue of political empowerment is still complicated. The women in India are now active voters and in most elections they have been found to be equal or even greater in their turnout as compared to men. The policy of reservation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions has made women more representatives in the grass root level. Nonetheless, Parliamentary and State Assembly representation is relatively low. Although women are in power in some places, their power to make decision is at times constrained by the pressures of the society, political influences, and economic reliance. This indicates that political involvement in terms of figures does not necessarily equate to actual power.

The justification of this research is to explore the relationship between the early social reform movements and the modern trends of women political involvement².

Most of the studies talk about historical reformers or modern political representation individually. Nonetheless, there is less literature that tries to connect the concepts of the nineteenth century feminist philosophers and current forms of democracy. This study is designed to fill that gap by following a chronological process of social reform towards political power. Through this, it brings to light the role of intellectual opposition to patriarchy that slowly evolved into the need to get political rights and representation. This study has three key goals. To begin with, it aims at examining how women in politics have evolved in history by the works of Ramabai and Shinde. Second, it seeks to explore the prevailing position of political participation of women in India at various levels, such as, voting, representation, and leadership. Third, it will find out the discrepancy between formal equality and substantive empowerment. This study is confined to the Indian context, and it mainly aims at the historical and theoretical analysis with references to the secondary sources. It does not involve primary fieldwork or interviews as well as data based on surveys. The research is based upon books, research articles, provisions in the constitution and government reports. Although such a method can restrict the depth of the empirical analysis, it will enable one to obtain a more general conceptual insight into the history of women political participation. On the whole, the introduction preconditions the analysis of the way the path of social reform to political power is the indicator of the important steps and persistence of the ways of the attainment of the real gender equality in India.

Literature Review

Research on political participation of women in India has been growing around various aspects such as historical analysis, feminist theory and modern-day representation. Numerous researches have been aimed at the developments following independence particularly in terms of voting behavior and representation in legislature. Researchers have pointed out that the voter turnout of women has been on a gradual but steady rise over decades and in certain states, they have even overtaken that of men. Research on Panchayati Raj Institutions has also focused on the opportunities that have been provided to women to enter the world of grassroots politics under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, through reservation policies. The argument of these works is that access has been increased through institutional reforms but they also identify the constraints of proxy representation and lack of influence in decision-making³. The other literature on feminist political thinking in India focuses on the works of the Indian reformers and early women thinkers of the nineteenth century. Their works have also been examined by scholars who have studied Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde as the earliest criticism of patriarchy and discrimination based on caste.

These works point out the way their concepts defied the conventional gender roles and the ethical two-fold standards that were placed on women. Feminist theorists have gone an extra mile to discuss how the liberal, Marxist and intersectional approaches can be used to explain the oppression of women in the Indian context. This body of theoretical literature offers a significant basis to the process of analysing women empowerment other than representation.

But, there is a perceptible gap in research that bridges the gap between early feminist thought and its contemporary political involvement. Numerous historical works pay attention only to social reform, whereas the research in the political science field tends to pay attention to the current electoral statistics without establishing their intellectual background. Consequently, the continuity of the reformist thought and contemporary political systems has not been adequately addressed⁴. This work seeks to fill this gap by connecting the trends of nineteenth-century feminist critiques to the existing trends of political participation, thus providing a more integrated picture of how women have come to move beyond social reform and political power.

Conceptual and Analytical Structure

To comprehend the political participation of women, there is the need to understand some of the important concepts associated with the political participation, political empowerment, and feminist theory. These ideas can be used to analyse the way women go out of the social exclusion into the active participation in the political processes. This section states what political participation is and how it can take place, what political empowerment means to women and what some of the key feminist views are that offer a theoretical foundation to this study. It also transfers such notions to the Indian case. Political participation is usually the activities involving the participation of the citizens in the political system. It involves formal and informal measures. Formal participation is through voting during elections, challenging elections, becoming members of political parties, and holding a public office. Informal participation encompasses attending political meetings, taking part in protests, joining in debates in the society, and being members of civil society organizations. Political participation in a democratic system is regarded as a fundamental right and also a sign of citizenship. But the right to vote is not the only thing in participation, there is also the right to influence decisions and policies⁵.

Political participation in the context of women has been restricted in the past because of social and structural factors. Women have long been excluded in the political institutions since they were considered to be in the domestic realm of home and family. Segregation of the private and the public life limited their access to education, property and position of leadership. Women could not easily access formal political arenas even after acquiring voting rights.

Hence, the issue of the involvement of women should not be examined by numbers but rather the quality and the effect of their involvement. Political empowerment of women can be defined as a process whereby women acquire the ability, the faith, and the power to engage equally with the political decision making.

It is also associated with modification of social attitudes which restrict the freedom of women. It does not just take more women representatives in the political arena to be empowered politically but women must be given a positive impact on politics and governance. Representation, voice and agency are all combined in empowerment. The feminist theory can give significant insights into these problems. Liberal feminism is concerned with rights and opportunities equality. This view holds that legal and institutional discrimination of women is one of the major contributors to its subordination. Liberal feminists maintain that barriers to involvement can be eliminated through reforms like equal education, equal employment opportunities and legal rights. This strategy in politics helps to endorse voting rights, anti-discrimination legislation, and reservation policy as an equal representation measure. The liberal feminist concepts can be seen in the constitutional provisions of equality and women reservation in the local governance in the Indian context.

According to Marxist feminism, it is different. It claims that the oppression of women is associated with the economic structures and the class relations. In this opinion, both patriarchy and capitalism collaborate in exploiting the labour of women both at home and in the market. The little political participation of women has been linked to their financial reliance and non-paid household duties. According to Marxist approach, the practice of empowering people needs the structural changes in economic relations such as access to property, wages, and economic independence. In India, economic inequality has an impact on political agency of women through the problems of wage gap, informal labour and rural poverty. Intersectional feminism also broadens the discussion because it acknowledges that women do not experience things in a similar manner. It brings out the intersection of gender with caste, class, religion, region and ethnicity. The caste in India has a great influence in determining the social hierarchy. Women in the marginalized communities tend to be discriminated twice or even thrice. Intersectional theory can be used to explain why upper-class urban women might find the political participation different to rural or Dalit women. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes reservation policies in local governance are an effort to deal with such stratified inequalities. When these theories are applied to the Indian context it is observed that there are various factors that affect the political participation of women. Social barriers have not however died out only because of legal rights. Women still lack time and mobility because of their economic reliance and unpaid care work, which proves Marxist feminist arguments. Meanwhile, the intervention of caste and regional distinctions proves the topicality of intersectional analysis.

These theoretical perspectives can also be applied to the intellectual works of some reformers, such as Ramabai or Shinde. The criticism they have of patriarchy is congruent with the liberal feminist principles of dignity and equality. Simultaneously, the fact that they are conscious of caste discrimination relates to intersectional thinking.

Even though they did not employ the contemporary feminist language, their works were a challenge to gender and social hierarchy. The political participation in modern India has increased in the number of voters as well as representation on the local level. Despite that, empowerment is still not complete. Women leaders are at times controlled by proxies of male relatives, inaccessibility to party resources, and social pressure. This fact demonstrates that involvement without structural transformation can never assure actual power. Hence, a liberal, Marxist, and intersectional approach is a better way to examine the political career of women through a comprehensive approach. Comprehensively, the conceptual and theoretical framework of this study focuses on the fact that political participation is not just about presence but power. Empowerment of women demands legal equality, economic independence as well as social change. Using the lens of feminist approaches to the Indian situation, in this section, one can find a baseline to observe how historical reconstruction efforts slowly led to the growth of women political rights, as well as to show how much remains to be done to achieve total equality in practice⁶.

Historical Transformation: from Social reform to Political rights

History of women political activity in India cannot be comprehended without references to social reform movements of the nineteenth century. Patriarchal traditions that defined the Indian society during this time greatly limited the freedom of women in virtually all aspects of life. Women were not allowed to access education, property rights and participation in the community. Child marriage, forced widowhood, and social isolation were some of the practices that depicted low status of women. The social reform movements were created as a reaction to these inequalities and became the basis of the future political awakening of women. The early reformers understood that social change needed to take place and it was only after this was done that political empowerment would be achievable. There was an attempt to educate women, to end the unhealthy traditions, and bring the gender inequality to the discussion table. These movements opened new avenues through which women were able to voice their opinion. With the women becoming literate and having access to new ideas, they started to challenge the traditional roles and wanted more rights⁷.

Though then the emphasis was made more on social reform, it slowly provoked women to consider their role in society and their possible contribution in the life of the people. Other notable figures in the era were Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai

Shinde whose intellectual work had a great impact in defying patriarchal standards. Pandita Ramabai was very much critical of the way women were treated in the orthodox Hindu society. She reiterated the importance of women education and independence and that ignorance and dependency continued to put women in a vicious circle of oppression.

Her writings and social work revealed the two-sided approach to both men and women with references to morality and religion in particular. Her attempts to open institutions of learning among women proved that she had the feeling that knowledge was the key to empowerment. In her most popular book *Stri Purush Tulana*, Tarabai Shinde made a radical commentary on gender inequality. She challenged the social hypocrisy in this text by pointing out that society blamed women as the cause of the social ills yet men took no action. Another aspect that was raised by Shinde was the interplay of caste and gender where not all women were equally oppressed. She was outspoken and aggressive in her arguments, questioning not only patriarchy but also caste hierarchy. Her work was, however, controversial in her time but it eventually became known as an early form of feminist thought in India.

Ramabai and Shinde played an important role in intellectual history since they changed the discourse of only changing the customs, but challenging the system of inequality itself. They wanted women to be dignified, educated and given moral equality. Although they were not directly involved in the electoral politics, their concepts formed the ideological background of women involvement in politics. They helped to develop political consciousness by making women view themselves as people with rights and agency. The early twentieth century was a shift to social reform into active political participation. In the national movement of resistance to the colonial rule, women started to take part in publicly organized demonstrations, boycotts, and civil disobedience movements. Other leaders like Mahatma Gandhi urged women to participate in the struggle saying that women would be needed to make their contributions towards the national development. Women of various regions and social backgrounds entered the public life breaking the traditional boundaries. The involvement in the freedom movement provided the women with the confidence, the experience of leadership and the political visibility. There were other organizations like All India Women Conference that were very significant in linking social reform with political rights. These groups required changes in laws concerning marriage, inheritance and education, and were also proponents of women suffrage. The concept of equal political rights to women became more acceptable at this time.

Upon independence in 1947, the Constitution of India provided a turning point in the political right of women. Indian women were also given equal rights to vote unlike some of the western countries where the women had to struggle to have the same rights to vote. This was a great success as far as official political

equality was concerned. The principle of equality and the ban of discrimination were laid down by the Articles 14, 15 and 16 of the Constitution. With time, other reforms reinforced the political participation of women. The Constitutional 73rd and 74th Amendments provided women reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies, making them have representation on the ground. These steps greatly added women in the local government. Nonetheless, constitutional foundations gave way to legal equality but social realities remained a challenge⁸.

Current practices of Women’s Political contribution

The political involvement of women in modern India is an indication of both a great development and a persistent issue. Social awareness, constitutional guarantees and democratic expansion have made women more visible in the political arena over the decades. Nonetheless, the participation should be checked in various ways such as voting behaviour, representation in legislative institutions, grassroots governance, urban institutions, political parties, and civil society movements. All these aspects offer a variation of women involvement in politics⁹.

The voter turnout of women has been on the rise in most states in India in recent elections. In other areas, women have registered a similar or even high turnout. This change is an indication of increased awareness, accessibility to the voting points, and specific activities of the Election Commission to persuade women voters. Political parties are also beginning to target women as a specific group of voters by making promises that cover welfare programs in areas of health, education and financial aid. Although the increased voter turnout makes people active participants, it does not necessarily ensure representation in decision-making positions.

Table-1: The key milestones in women political empowerment in India.

Year	Event	Significance
1829	Abolition of Sati	Beginning of legal reform for women
1882	Women’s education reforms	Expansion of literacy
1917	Women’s delegation to British Govt.	Political demand for suffrage
1950	Constitution adopted	Universal adult franchise
1992	73 rd & 74 th Amendments	Reservation in local bodies
2023	Women’s Reservation Act	Reservation in Parliament

Source: Compiled from historical studies on women’s reform movements and constitutional developments in India.

Table-2: Gender-based voter turnout in Lok Sabha Elections (2009-2019)⁸.

Election Year	Male Turnout (%)	Female Turnout (%)
2009	60.3	55.8
2014	67.1	65.5
2019	67	67.2

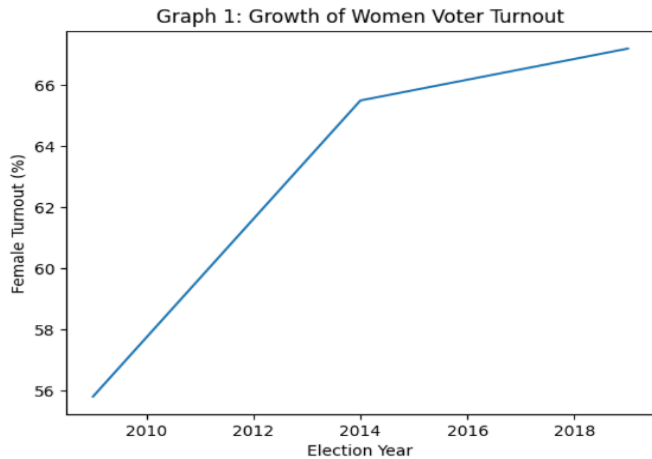


Figure-1: Rise of Women’s Voter participation in Lok Sabha Elections (2009–2019)⁸.

The situation is different in Parliament and State Assemblies. Despite the fact women have been represented in legislative houses since independence, their total percentage is still relatively lower as compared to that of men. The number of women Members of Parliament has been steadily growing over the years although they are still in disproportion to the population. The same trends are present in most State Assemblies. The women who make it to the top as leaders usually struggle with lack of party support, financial support and social demands on family issues. Still, despite these obstacles, there are women politicians who have served in major leadership roles proving that women can be good leaders when they are given a chance. The biggest milestone in political engagement of women came with the establishment of reservation policies in Panchayati Raj Institutions in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. This reservation was later raised by many states to fifty percent. This has seen the entry of millions of women into the world of grassroots politics. This has been termed as a radical move since it saw women in rural and marginalized groups being introduced in formal decision-making processes. At the village level, women leaders have been able to deal with problems like sanitation, education, drinking water and healthcare. They have also contributed to creation of awareness of gender-related issues in the community.

Table-3: Participation of Women in Lok Sabha (2009–2019) ⁸.

Year	Total MPs	Women MPs	Percentage (%)
2009	543	59	10.9
2014	543	62	11.4
2019	543	78	14.4

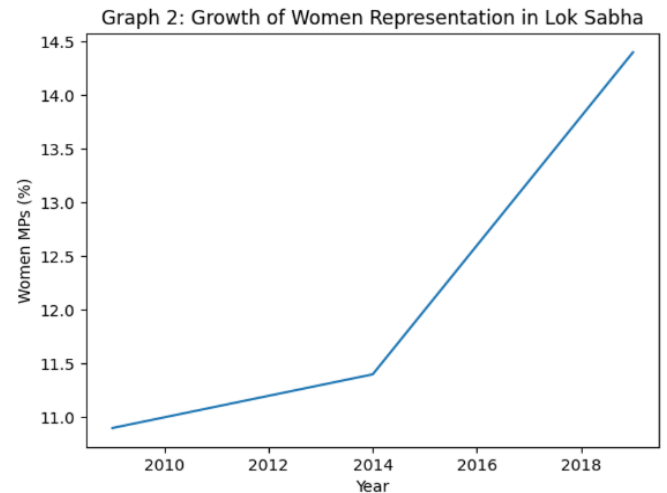


Figure-2: Women Members of Parliament in Lok Sabha (2009-2019) Percentage Growth⁸.

There has been also the phenomenon of proxy representation in certain cases whereby the male representatives of the family wield power on behalf of elected women representatives. Women are at times hindered by social pressure, inadequate literacy, and deficiency of training to make decisions. Though these may be the cases, studies have indicated that most women leaders become more experienced and assertive with time. Reservation policies have thus provided both the opportunities and controversies on the nature of empowerment. Women political participation is also offered by cities in local government. The 74th Constitutional Amendment made the same reservation to municipal corporations and councils. Women representatives in urban governance mostly concentrate on matters like health of the people, housing, safety as well as environment. Urban politics, however, can be affected by competition between parties and distribution of resources, which can restrain independent action. However, with the inclusion of women in the municipal institutions, the leadership and governance perceptions have changed slowly. Political parties are very instrumental in influencing women representation. The choice of candidates, funding of campaigns, and hierarchy of parties play a major role in the entry of people in electoral politics. It is clear that even though there are numerous parties that advocate gender equality publicly, the number of tickets assigned to women candidates is small. Women are usually put in constituencies whereby the party has lesser chances of winning.

There is also the internal party structure that is dominated by males thus women have a hard time ascending to the top leadership positions. Meanwhile, political parties have established women wings or organisations to organise the female voters and leaders.

In addition to the formal political institutions, the role of the civil society movements has been significant in increasing the participation of women. Through women organizations, self help groups, and advocacy networks, awareness has been created in areas like domestic violence, harassment in the workplace and the availability of education. These movements tend to affect the policy of the citizens by demanding changes and communicating with the legislators. The civil society activism offers a different way of political involvement that does not rely on the electoral politics only. It enables women to mobilize and speak up in ways other than the conventional party formations. The emergence of the digital medium and social media has also altered the trends in political participation. There is a growing trend among women to air their views, find support and fight against discrimination using the online platform. On the one hand, the digital involvement increases visibility, on the other, it makes women vulnerable to online bullying and misinformation. This dictates the necessity to study political participation not just in the physical institutions but also in cyberspace. In general, modern trends of women political representation in India can be described as both progressive and restrictive. Women are big voters and they take a reserved seat at the grass-root level. They represent Parliament, State Assemblies and urban institutions, but are still underrepresented in comparison with men. Opportunities and limitations are still determined by political parties and civil society organizations. The movement between social reform and political power has indeed taken a good course, but the transition between participation to full empowerment is yet to be achieved¹⁰.

Administrative and Policy System

The development of women in politics in India is directly related to institutional and policy framework that was developed after independence. Even though the social reform movements generated awareness and the national movement provided the people with an opportunity to participate in the legislative process, it was the Constitution and further legal reforms that officially secured the political rights of women. The opportunity to participate is developed by institutions, and that is why it is necessary to consider constitutional provisions, decentralization reforms, the Women Reservation Act, and some government initiatives, which should empower the women. Gender equality in political life is based on the Constitution of India. Article 14 guarantees that the state cannot deny any person's equality before the law or equal protection of the laws within India. Article 15 says that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on the grounds only of caste, sex, religion, race or place of birth.

Notably, Article 15(3) permits the state to come up with special measures in relation to women and children, which leaves room to affirmative action policies. Article 16 guarantees egalitarianism in the area of state employment. The adoption of universal adult franchise was one of the greatest constitutional decisions at the time of independence. Since the inception of the Republic, women had the right to vote equally with men. This was on a progressive move, particularly bearing in mind that there are numerous nations that gave women suffrage long after. The Constitution officially established the foundations of democracy when women were acknowledged as full-fledged political actors. The Directive Principles of the State Policy are also encouraging the state to advance justice and equality thereby indirectly empowering women.

The formal equality, however, did not necessarily lead to equal representation. The representation of women in the Parliament and State Assemblies was low in a number of decades following independence. Having identified this loophole, the policy makers have proposed reforms that will help in decentralization of power and more representation on the grassroots level. In this, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992 and effected in 1993 took a new turn. The 73rd Amendment was emphasized on Panchayati Raj Institutions in villages whereas the 74th Amendment was on urban local bodies. The two amendments required that women be given at least one-third of the seats in local governance institutions. This reservation was not exclusive to general seats but also to leadership positions like in the case of chairpersons. This quota was later raised by many states to fifty percent. These changes greatly increased the access of women to formal institutions of politics. These reforms have had a significant effect. Millions of women have become elected representatives of village councils, block level committees and district boards. This massive enfranchisement has changed the political situation at the grass root level. Women leaders have solved problems of water supply, sanitation, education, and healthcare locally. Their leadership has in most instances raised issues that were not given attention before. Meanwhile, the lack of training, the absence of financial independence, and social opposition remain the issues that impact their performance. However, the 73rd and 74th Amendments reflect one of the significant institutional endeavours to convert participation into representation. The other significant change in the institutional structure is the Women Reservation Act. During several years, it was an issue whether women should be allowed to seat in Parliament and State Assemblies. The proponents claimed that the absence of reservation would keep structural restrictions on women entry into high legislative bodies. The Women Reservation Act was finally enacted following protracted debates to ensure women were given one third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. It is likely that this reform will bring a great deal more women to the national and state levels once it is fully enforced.

The Women Reservation Act is a manifestation of the notion that equality is sometimes to be corrected by some exceptional actions in order to address historical inequalities. The Act tries to secure a certain percentage of seats so that women can be given room in decision making organs where they have always been underrepresented. The implementation however will be based on political will, delimitation processes and supportive party structures. The Act is thus a landmark and a new stage of political empowerment of women. Besides the changes in the constitution and legislative reforms, the government has initiated a number of initiatives that empower the participation of women. Girls education, financial inclusion and skills development programs indirectly empower women politically because they boost the confidence and independence of women. Plans that promote self-help groups have formed networks of more rights aware women who can organize themselves into action. The training of elected women representatives in leadership programs is done with the aim of enhancing administrative ability and understanding of policy. The initiatives taken by the government to solve the problems of maternal health, sanitation, and rural development also provide a conducive environment to woman leaders to perform effectively. Women are economically and socially empowered and therefore have higher chances of participating in political processes. As such, the policies of empowerment need to be perceived as intertwined with political involvement. Although these institutional efforts exist, there are still problems. Reservation policies can multiply figures, but to engage in something meaningful, one must have access to information, resources and ability to make decisions independently. It is also the duty of the political parties to support the women by advancing them internally. All in all, the institutional and policy framework in India has a high constitutional commitment to gender equality. Since universal adult franchise to decentralization reforms and the Women Reservation Act, the state has gone an extra mile to increase women participation in politics. Empowerment is also supported through government programs, which deal with social and economic obstacles. Yet, institutions in themselves cannot ensure change. There also need to be ongoing monitoring, capacity building and cultural transformation to make sure that formal rights are turned into actual political power. The development of the policies indicates that India is still trying to shift towards the process of symbolic inclusion to real gender justice in democratic governance¹¹.

Table-4: The representation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Selected States¹¹.

State	Reservation (%)	Actual Representation (%)
Bihar	50	54
Rajasthan	50	52
Kerala	50	51

Barriers and Challenges

The women in India still experience a number of obstacles on the way to full political empowerment, despite the constitutional guarantees and policy changes. Although there has been an upsurge in terms of participation in terms of voting and representation in the local levels, the structural issues are more profound. These obstacles lie in the patriarchal system, the socio-cultural system, economic disparities, educational barriers, the caste system and religion, geographical inequality, political violence, and media prejudice. These challenges are necessary to understand why representation is not necessarily translated to actual power. Patriarchy is still one of the greatest challenges to the political participation of women. The Indian society has always had different roles of men and women, and in many cases, women were placed in the domestic realm of home and family. The power of making decisions has always been linked to men. Women who venture into politics may have to go against the family members and communities who hold that leadership is a men affair even today. Women are restricted by social requirements concerning marriage, motherhood, and household chores. Women representatives are sometimes pressured to behave as the male relatives want consequently lessening their independence. These socio-cultural norms provide a set up in which the authority of women is doubted or challenged. Women also have their political agency limited by economic and educational barriers. Women have less money to fund election campaigns or maintain political careers due to economic dependency on male family members. Campaigning may need financial support, traveling and networking which women may not be readily able to afford, particularly in rural or low-income areas. Moreover, even though the literacy levels of women have grown, there are still gaps in some areas and neighborhoods. The lack of education may influence the self-confidence, understanding of rights, and knowledge of the administrative process. Women might not find it easy to manoeuvre through complicated political structures without the right training and support. Effective political participation is therefore closely related to the economic independence and educational empowerment.

There are other layers of discrimination created by caste, religion and regional inequality. Caste-based social hierarchy in India still determines resource and opportunity accessibility. Women of the lower castes are usually discriminated against twice, due to their gender and their being in the underprivileged groups. Intersectional inequalities imply that political participation among women is not always similar. In some areas, religious conventions can also limit the mobility or access to the outside world by women. Opportunities are also further defined by regional differences between rural and urban regions. City women might be more educated and connected to political spheres, country women might be more socially controlled and deprived. All of these varieties of inequality prove that gender cannot be studied independently of the other social identities.

Women leaders are faced with the challenge of political violence and intimidation. In some instances, electoral politics may be characterized by rough campaigning, threats or harassment. Candidates who are women can be subjected to character attacks or misinformation so as to deter them. Harassment has also taken online grounds where women politicians and activists are abused and threatened. This may demoralize women to participate in or remain in politics. The issues of safety thus become an obstacle to equal participation. The media representation is also significant in the perception of the people. Female politicians are also evaluated on the basis of looks, personal life, or emotional behaviour instead of competence in policies. Media discourses can strengthen stereotypes by causing women to be less depicted as leaders. Despite the fact that positive examples of strong women leadership have been witnessed, biased coverage still has an opportunity to shape the minds of people. Normalization of women in political leadership would require a balanced and responsible media representation. On the whole, the obstacles to political empowerment of women are both intertwined and structural. Social and economic disparities are so entrenched that legal rights are not sufficient to eliminate them. Although India has recorded progress in increasing the involvement of women, patriarchy, economic dependence, intersectional discrimination as well as political hostility are still persistent. The solution to these impediments is not only an institutional change but also a larger social change to provide a friendly and accommodative political space to women¹².

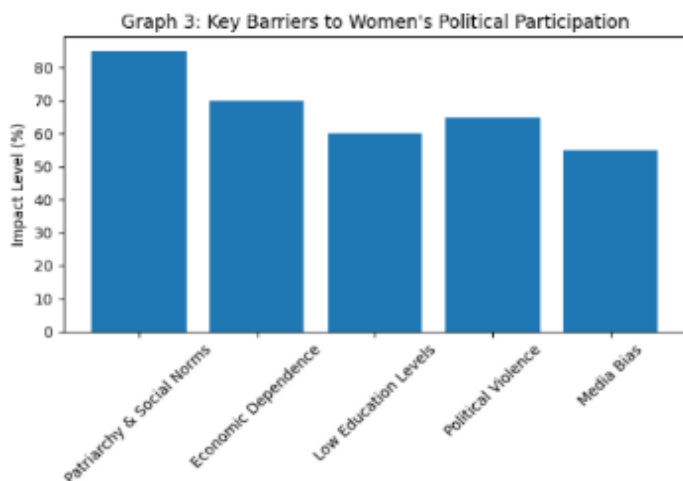


Figure-3: Major Barriers that influence Political participation among women in India.

Practical Studies and Observational Analysis

The question of women political participation in India cannot be resolved only through theoretical and institutional approaches but it must be analyzed in terms of real experiences and facts. Here, the chosen case studies of grassroots women leaders are presented, as well as the current movements organized by women, and the main statistical trends regarding the women

political participation. The Panchayati Raj system is one of the prominent examples of grassroots women leadership in which reservation policies have introduced millions of women to local government. Women sarpanches and panchayat members in states like Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala have proven to be effective in solving the day-to-day issues in the village. An example is that in some Rajasthan villages, women leaders have intensified the conservation of water, better sanitation infrastructure and have made sure that education of the children is given priority. Such leaders usually take decisions based on their local understanding that suits the needs of people. Through their leadership, they are defying the conventional beliefs that women are less competent in political duties and that given a chance they can play significant roles in governance. Along with individual leaders, modern movements that are led by women have shaped the political discourse in India. Gender violence campaigns like the Nirbhaya protests, environmental campaigns led by women, and land and labour rights campaigns by grassroots groups are examples of how women organise themselves and influence the agenda of the masses. These movements tend to operate outside formal political institutions but still influence policymakers and society. The marches and campaigns of women have highlighted issues of safety, employment and legal reforms to protect women's rights. These social activities demonstrate that political participation is not restricted to elections or office-holding but also includes participation in social movements that challenge inequalities and demand change. The statistical patterns also give a deeper understanding of the political participation of women. The data provided by the Election Commission of India shows that voter turnout among women in recent general elections has been rising steadily, and in many cases, the gender gap has reduced or even reversed. For example, in the last two general elections, women's turnout has been equal to or higher than men's in several constituencies. This trend indicates increasing political awareness and mobilization among women voters.

At the same time, representation in legislative bodies remains limited. In State Legislative Assemblies and Parliament, women's representation usually does not exceed 15%. These figures show that while women are active voters, they remain underrepresented as elected officials. Reservation policies have played a major role at the local level. After the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, women now occupy about one-third of the seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies. In states where reservation is increased to 50%, women's participation often exceeds half of elected representatives. These figures highlight how policy interventions can directly improve representation. Despite these positive developments, challenges remain. Proxy representation—where decisions are influenced by male relatives—continues in some rural areas. Limited access to training, financial resources and administrative knowledge also restricts effective participation. However, overall data suggests that women's political participation is becoming increasingly visible across different levels of governance.

In general, both case studies and statistical trends demonstrate that women's political participation in India is complex and evolving. Grassroots leaders show strong local impact, women-led movements expand political discourse, and statistical trends reveal both progress and persistent gaps. This section reinforces that women's political participation must be understood not only through theory and legal frameworks but also through lived experiences and empirical realities¹³.

Findings and Discussion

Historical, theoretical, institutional, and empirical aspects of women in politics in India indicate some significant trends in the analysis. To begin with, it has been a slow and cumulative process of transformation of social reform to political representation. Ramabai and Shinde were among the early reformers who raised intellectual awareness on gender inequality which was later to lead to the awakening of women in the political arena. This demonstrates that political empowerment did not spring out of thin air after independence but rather it was a process that occurred after a long socio transformation process. Second, institutional changes have made women participate in a formal way in large numbers. The state is dedicated to gender inclusion as it is evidenced by constitutional guarantees, decentralization by the 73rd and 74th Amendments, and the Women Reservation Act. There are statistical trends that show an increase in voter turnout by women and better representation at the grassroots level. But the national and state representation is still relatively weak. This is an indication that although the political space has increased, equality in leadership is yet to be achieved. Theoretically, the results confirm a mix of liberal, Marxist, and intersectional feminist perspectives. The liberal reforms have given the legal equality and reservation policy that has added to the number representation. The intersectional theory also describes why the various experiences of participation are influenced by caste, class, and regional inequalities. All these views combined demonstrate that empowerment does not just entail legal rights but structural and social change. One of the biggest revelations of this study is the difference between the representation and the real power. Although women are now more and more represented in the electoral politics, their power in decision making process is usually minimal because of the party hierarchies, social pressures as well as scarcity of resources. In others, the independent authority is weakened by the proxy leadership. Thus, the participation should not be measured by the numbers alone but by the extent of impact on the policy development and autonomy that women have¹⁴.

Policy suggestions and Future plan

Although India has already achieved some steps in increasing women political participation, additional reforms are needed to change the representation into power. The structural reforms must be aimed at reinforcing the enforcement of the current laws and accountability in the political institutions. A successful

adoption of the Women Reservation Act in Parliament and State Assemblies will go a long way towards making more women appear in the upper levels of legislations. The capacity building is also essential in enhancing the political empowerment of women. Most of the women representatives who are elected into office, particularly on the grassroots level, need to be trained on governance procedures, budgeting, policy analysis and making speeches. Regular leadership development programs and workshops should be introduced in government agencies and civil society organizations. Women leaders also can be made more at ease in administrative systems by digital literacy and legal awareness programs. Empowerment should not only entail entering into politics but should also entail functioning successfully within the institutions. Women can further be increased by reforming the elections. Economic barriers could be cut by offering financial support systems or campaign funding support to women candidates. Political violence, harassment, and misinformation, whether offline or online, should be dealt with strictly to make the environment a safer place. Women candidates can be spared the intimidation by making the campaign practices transparent and enforcing electoral laws more strongly. The development of a gender-sensitive political environment needs more social change. Gender equality should be encouraged in the educational programs and stereotypes that restrict women leadership should be broken. Media houses should also make sure women politicians are represented fairly and in a respectable manner with emphasis on the contributions of their policies and not their personal lives. Traditional attitudes can also be changed by encouraging the male allies in the communities and political parties¹⁵.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the history of women political participation in India by following the historical path of social reform movements that started in the nineteenth century and ended in the present-day democratic systems. The main thesis of this paper has been that the empowerment of women in politics did not sprout after independence but rather grew slowly through intellectual opposition, social reforms, national struggle and constitutional devotion. Through the examination of the works of early philosophers like Ramabai and Shinde and the current institutional frameworks, this study has brought to fore the similarity between the social reform and political participation. The first significant point of the research is that social reform movements provided the intellectual basis of the political consciousness of women. Reformers questioned patriarchal values, encouraged women to learn and insisted on dignity and equality. Even though their attention at that moment was more on social problems, their thoughts gave women the impulse to challenge unequal power relations and envision them as active members of the social life. The national movement also extended this involvement by introducing women into mass political activity. Therefore, the history of political empowerment can be traced back to the past social struggle

against social injustice. The second argument is based on the issue of constitutional and institutional reforms in formalizing the political rights of women. The introduction of universal adult franchise, equality guaranteed by the Constitution, decentralization in accordance with the 73rd and 74th Amendments, and the enactment of the Women Reservation Act are some of the steps taken to an inclusive government. These measures have seen more women being represented particularly on the grassroots level. Statistical trends indicate that there is increased voter turnout of women and an increased involvement in the local institutions. Nonetheless, the representation on the more advanced levels of legislation is still insufficient, as it indicates that there are still structural barriers.

To respond to the overall research question, which is how early reformist conceptions relate to current trends in political participation, the research discovers that there is an evident historical correlation. The intellectual objections by Ramabai and Shinde to patriarchy and the caste system prepared the way to demands of political equality later. Equality before the law and numbers are not necessarily the guarantee of the autonomous decision-making power. The theoretical discussion also illustrates that the political participation of women can only be understood through the liberal, Marxist, and intersectional approaches. Legal changes are consistent with feminist liberalism concepts of equality of rights, however, economic reliance and unpaid household labour, as identified by the Marxist theory, still limit the agency of women. Intersectional analysis demonstrates the influence of caste, class, religion and regional differences on various empowerment experiences. The two views combined indicate that there are various social structures that affect political participation. The general implication of this research goes beyond the Indian setting. The experience of Indians demonstrates that the development of democratic inclusion is a long process that necessitates not only institutional change but also social change. A significant step is to expand access to the political institutions, and the significant empowerment requires the change of attitudes, the enhancement of the capacity, and the accountability. To conclude, the social reform to political power is a step of progress and a step of struggle. India has recorded significant successes in ensuring women rights as well as augmented participation. However, patriarchy, economic inequalities, and political enmity are the problems that still constrain actual empowerment. The future of women in politics is in the perseverance in structural reforms, capacity building, and establishment of a gender-sensitive political environment. Such collective efforts alone can bring

the dream of equality that was envisaged by early reformists to democratic reality.

References

1. Forbes, G. (1996). *Women in modern India*. Cambridge University Press.
2. Chakravarti, U. (2003). *Gendering caste: Through a feminist lens*. Stree.
3. Omvedt, G. (2003). *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and caste*. Sage Publications.
4. Tharu, S., & Lalita, K. (1991). *Women writing in India: 600 B.C. to the early twentieth century*. Oxford University Press.
5. Kishwar, M. (1996). Women and politics in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31(43), 2869–2874.
6. Rai, S. M. (2017). *Gender and political representation in India*. Oxford University Press.
7. Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment. *Third World Quarterly*, 26(1), 13–24.
8. Election Commission of India (2020). *Statistical report on general elections to the Lok Sabha 2019*. Government of India.
9. Jaffrelot, C. (2012). *India's silent revolution: The rise of the lower castes in North India*. Columbia University Press.
10. Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
11. Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2023). *Women in Panchayati Raj institutions*. Government of India.
12. Sharma, K. (2024). Women's political representation in India: Trends and challenges. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 15(2), 45–60.
13. Gupta, R. (2025). Feminist thought and political participation in contemporary India. *Indian Journal of Political Science*, 86(1), 112–128.
14. Kumar, S. (2024). Gender equality and democratic participation in India. *Research Journal of Social Sciences*, 19(3), 55–67.
15. Singh, P. (2026). Women leadership and political empowerment in India. *International Journal of Social Research*, 21(1), 22–35.