

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ELECTORAL POLITICS IN INDIA: SILENT FEMINISATION

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ABSTRACT The recent participation levels of women in formal politics in India reveal two positives that augur well. First, the upsurge among women voters that started in the 1990s reached the highest female turnout ever, so far, in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Second, women's participation in high-voltage election campaigns during the 2014 general elections also showed a substantial increase. However, the continued under-representation of women in legislative bodies and within the rank and file of political parties offsets the momentous gains made in the people-driven feminisation of electoral politics in India.

Within a brief historical context identifying the beginnings of women's electoral participation in India, the article presents a time series analysis of women's voting patterns, showing that there have never been concerted efforts by political parties to mobilise female voters on any issue concerning women in either national or state level elections. Promises by political parties in their manifestos on gender issues remain clichéd and are conveniently forgotten after the hustings. India's failure to pass the Women's Reservation Bill is presented as the most telling testimony about lack of seriousness among political parties in taking better account of women's increasing electoral participation.

KEYWORDS: *affirmative action, elections, feminisation of politics, gender, India, politics, voting patterns, women, Women's Reservation Bill*

Introduction

Women's active participation in electoral competitions is a valid indicator of the efficacious growth of democracy in any country of the world today (Nelson &

Chowdhury, 1994; Thomas & Wilcox, 2005). As an indicator of equality and freedom, it cuts across genders in sharing political power and providing liberty and space to women within the democratic framework of electoral politics. The 1950 Constitution of India promised in the Preamble to secure to all its citizens 'JUSTICE, social, economic and political', as well as 'EQUALITY of status and of opportunity' (Basu, 1991: 21). Despite this clear-cut constitutional mandate for providing equality to women in the public domain, including electoral politics, prejudice and discrimination against women in India continue even after 70 years of independence. This opens up important debates on organising politics around difference (Akerker, 1995). The representation of women in the Lower House (Lok Sabha) of India's Parliament does not at all mirror the gender demographics of the country. The presence of women after 15 Lok Sabha elections is still only a notch above the halfway mark of the world average of 22 per cent representation of women, with India ranked 141 among 193 countries (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016). Women in India have largely failed to acquire the critical mass required to introduce gender perspectives in political decision-making processes at higher levels and to promote gender-friendly legislation (Muni, 1979: 42). Similarly, the number of women representatives in most state legislatures in India remains below the world mark, indicating a pan-Indian pattern of gender exclusion in electoral politics, under-representation in legislative bodies and the necessity of continuing quests to achieve gender parity in sharing political power with men.

Imbalanced representation of women exists not only in legislative bodies at national and state levels but also in the government's executive wing, not to speak of the judiciary. A scan of national governments in India over the years reveals that few women have held posts of cabinet ministers, with almost all crucial portfolios occupied by men. This notable marginalisation of women arises to some extent from the inherent dynamics of political party competition, which is patriarchal and male dominated in nature. Political parties at both national and regional levels continue to discriminate against women not only in terms of seat allotment but also within the rank and file of parties and their decision-making collectives.

In contrast to such exclusionary policies followed by the political dispensation in India, women's participation as voters has seen significant expansion since the late 1990s (Deshpande, 2004: 5431), reaching an all-time high in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. The difference in turnout of men and women, which was in double digits in the 1960s, dropped to a single digit in the Lok Sabha elections during the last decade of the twentieth century. The gender gap in voting turnout then nosedived sharply in the 2014 general elections to below 2 per cent. Such welcome developments in India challenge the prevailing worldwide belief in election studies from the 1970s that, especially in developing societies, women are politically less active than men (Deshpande, 2004: 5431–2). The global figures, with some African countries leading the world (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016), make it pertinent to revisit Indian women's involvement in the various stages of elections, a highly competitive issue with various opinions and differing viewpoints. Some theorists argue that electoral processes in India are fraught

with male patriarchy and dominance, acting as impediments, deliberately excluding women from sharing power as equals with men. Others dispute this argument, claiming that the increased participation of women in electoral competition since the 1990s as voters and women's sharing of political power at grassroots levels reveal that electoral politics in India is no more gender-exclusive, but rather inclusive. They feel that due to the strength and determination of women's movements in different parts of India, as well as government-regulated quotas, women's presence in the political arena is increasing, particularly in voting patterns, decision-making power and women's access to positions in public office (Ahern et al., 2000; Banerjee, 2003; Ghosh & Lama-Rewal, 2005; Vyasulu & Vyasulu, 1999).

Given such divergent viewpoints about women's levels of participation in the electoral process, based on primary and secondary sources, the present article analyses the underlying causal factors that determine the levels of women's participation in electoral competitions. It focuses on women's inclusion in the electoral process as party candidates and single interaction voters. Additionally, the research attempts to identify determinants that act as barriers and impediments for women to proactively engage in election campaigning and electoral activities that involve multiple interactions. These are also more labour-intensive, involve sustained political interactions over a period of time and require frequent negotiations outside the household.

This research also quantitatively determines key factors that lead to higher participation of women in the electoral process as voters and as multi-participatory campaigners. The article briefly charts the engagement of women in the election process from a historical point of view to understand the beginning of women's participation from limited electoral activities to more intensive participatory activities in the twenty-first century and the notable electoral upsurge of Indian women as voters since the 1990s. The article concludes with suggesting ways ahead for further enhancing women's participation in electoral politics and governance. These policy suggestions focus on corrections needed for obliterating gender inequalities in the political domain and providing further much-needed thrust for electoral empowerment of women in India, focusing on the symbolic hurdle of the Women's Reservation Bill (Mukherjee, 1997; Shah & Gandhi, 1991).

Markers of Women's Engagement in Electoral Competitions

Taking a broader perspective, the participation of women in politics not only comprises interactions in elections but also involves participation in trade unions, co-operatives, women's collectives, informal and formal politics. The term 'political participation' has been defined as a citizen's active involvement with public institutions, including voting, candidacy, campaigning, occupying political office and/or lobbying individually or through membership in a group (Arora, 1999; Gleason, 2001). This article uses the term in a much narrower sense, limited to women's participation in formal electoral politics at state and national level in electoral competitions only. The engagement of

women in electoral politics at the grassroots level of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has not been included here for two pertinent reasons. First, empirical data for women's electoral participation in India are available mostly for state and national elections. Second, affirmative action regarding reservations of seats for women in PRIs has been implemented (Kishwar, 1996) and has to some extent corrected earlier prevailing gender exclusions and disparities during the last two decades (Ghosh & Lama-Rewal, 2005; Narasimhan, 1999; Vyasulu & Vyasulu, 1999). However, an overview and qualitative analysis of the grassroots participation of women remains important to provide a more holistic picture of women's levels and patterns of participation in electoral competition.

The assessment and efficacy of the electoral participation of women and their status compared to men in India are based on three parameters and markers. First, participation in elections as evidence of women's turnout as voters and their representation in the Lower House are analysed, based on time series data from India's Election Commission archives. This is supplemented by comparative analyses of seats allotted to women in general elections by the national political parties in the last three general elections in India. Second, women's electoral behaviours and attitudes are examined. This covers levels of women's political awareness, commitment and involvement in electoral politics, their autonomy and independence in electoral behaviour, plus choices and barriers that act as impediments for participating as active campaigners during elections. This parameter is scrutinised through election survey data made available by the Data Unit of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in Delhi. Third, the efficacy in electoral competitions is measured through an assessment of women's roles and efficiency in the electoral process and society's attitude to new political roles of women. This includes the extent of women's success as election candidates, the efficiency of the women's movement, the nature of leadership in political outfits and the effectiveness of campaigns for women's mobilisation, particularly on issues that directly concern them generally and specifically as women ministers in the central government. The efficacy of women in electoral processes is ascertained qualitatively and based on gender analysis as quantitative data on this are not available.

Women's Electoral Participation in India

A historical overview of women's rights generally (Kumar, 1997) and of participation in electoral competition both chronologically and thematically traces its origin to the Swadeshi movement in Bengal (1905–8), which marked the beginning of Indian women's participation in nationalist activities and also brought the question of women's suffrage and voting rights to the forefront (Nair, 1996: 122–44). Tracing the origins of the women's suffrage movement in India, Forbes (1979) observes that the insistence of organised women to be treated as equals of men emerged not from perceptions of the needs of women in India but from the influence of certain British women. Thus, the origins of the movement for women's suffrage in India in the early twentieth century

were replicated on the model of Britain and through the work of British women reformers living in India. The first demands for franchise arose in 1917 when the Women's Indian Association was set up in Madras with the primary focus of 'seeking an enlarged role for women in public life' (Nair, 1996: 124). Important literature covers how these efforts related to the nationalist movement and affected various parts of India (Everett, 1985; Mazumdar, 1979). Eventually, the women's suffrage movement came to terms with nationalist concerns and suffragist ideals had to be justified in Indian terms and linked to the nationalist issues of political rights and colonial status that dominated public discourse in the 1920s and 1930s in India (Southard, 1993).

As a result of the women's suffrage movement, limited voting rights were extended to some women in different provinces of India between 1920 and 1929, starting in Madras (Nair, 1996: 132). However, these rights were given only to a very narrow section of Indian women based on property qualifications. The Government of India Act of 1935 later provided suffrage rights to a wider section of women, though still encumbered by qualifications, such as literacy, property ownership or marriage with propertied men. The Act enfranchised one woman for every five men enfranchised (Visram, 1992). Despite the women's movement's opposition to reservation of seats on a gender basis, the 1935 Act granted 41 reserved seats for women in the provincial legislatures as well as limited reservations in the central legislature, leading to cleavages in the women's movement on gender and religious lines. However, women took advantage of the seats reserved for them in the elections held in 1937, as 80 women won the elections to become legislators. At that point, India had the third highest number of women legislators in the world, after the United States and the Soviet Union (Visram, 1992). Though reservation of seats for women in the waning days of the colonial era was quite short-lived and subdivided along religious lines, this gave women a foothold in Indian legislative life and set a precedent which women could draw on decades later (Jenkins, 2003; Nair, 1996: 122).

The post-independence period did not witness much concerted or united effort to create inclusive electoral spaces for women. The Constitution of 1950 did not reserve seats for women in the legislature. Women's political participation after independence was largely constrained by social norms shaping opportunities and perceptions of women's involvement in politics. Those perceptions were sometimes unique to men, at times shared by women (Arora, 1999; Gleason, 2001; Nair, 1996). Overall, the mass participation of women in the political field during the freedom struggle seemed to decline after independence. Women's involvement in politics and electoral competition became confined to familial connections rather than being based on interest and societal encouragement to actively participate in politics. Political parties, reflecting the prevailing societal ethos, failed to address this issue and systematically excluded women from electoral participation (Baseline Report, 1998). However, as tokens for their contribution in the struggle for India's independence, political parties allotted women a few seats in the general elections. This becomes evident from the first Lok

Table 1. **Representation of Women in Lok Sabha 1952–2014**

Lok Sabha	Total No. of Seats	Women Members Who Won	% of Total
First (1952)	489	22	4.4
Second (1957)	494	27	5.4
Third (1962)	494	34	6.7
Fourth (1967)	523	31	5.9
Fifth (1971)	521	22	4.2
Sixth (1977)	544	19	3.4
Seventh (1980)	544	28	5.1
Eighth (1984)	544	44	8.1
Ninth (1989)	529	28	5.3
Tenth (1991)	509	36	7.0
Eleventh (1996)	541	40*	7.4
Twelfth (1998)	545	44*	8.0
Thirteenth (1999)	543	48*	8.8
Fourteenth (2004)	543	45*	8.1
Fifteenth (2009)	543	59	10.9
Sixteenth (2014)	543	61	11.2

Source: Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

Note: *Including one nominated member.

Sabha elections in 1952, where women could win and occupy a paltry 4.4 per cent of the total seats in the Lower House (Table 1).

Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing equality of sexes, the demand for greater representation of women in political institutions in India was taken up seriously only after the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (Government of India, 1974: 283–305). This suggested that women's representation in political institutions, especially at the grassroots level, needed to be increased through a policy of reservation of seats for women. Subsequently, the National Perspective Plan for Women argued for introducing a 30 per cent quota for women at all levels of elective bodies (Department of Women and Child Development, 1988; Ghosh & Lama-Rewal, 2005: 3–4). Women's groups and gender politics, however, insisted that reservation be restricted to the panchayat level to encourage grassroots participation of women in electoral politics. The national consensus around this demand resulted in the adoption of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution in 1993 that introduced 33 per cent reservation for women in institutions of local governance. This has been implemented 'in all the states of India without evoking any hostility or

opposition from male politicians or society at large' (Kishwar, 1996: 2867). In 1995, the question of affirmative action for women was raised again, this time focused on reservations for women in the Parliament. Initially, most political parties agreed to this demand in principle, but dissensions soon surfaced. When the Bill addressing this issue was introduced in the Eleventh Parliament in 1997, several political parties and groups raised objections regarding issues of elitism and overlapping quotas for women generally and for lower caste women. The proposed Bill, introduced 20 years ago in the Parliament, is still gathering dust and there are no clear indications when it would see the light of day.

Thematic Patterns of Gender Interactions in Elections

While the engagement of women in electoral competitions in India is clearly varied, the levels of inclusiveness are uneven, with significant distortions in participatory norms (Palshikar & Kumar, 2004). The electoral participation of women can be systematically decoded and analysed based on a multi-stratified participatory model. This model is triangular in form, with four distinct strata which can be easily differentiated, both qualitatively and quantitatively, at every layer. At the top level are women representatives in the Lower House (Table 1) and in state legislative assemblies, the narrowest and numerically restricted category. In the second stratum are women as candidates of political parties in electoral competitions and as members/functionaries of political parties. In quantitative terms, they are many times more than in the top layer. Third, women as active campaigners and torchbearers of political parties and their participation form a far wider category, much larger in numbers. Finally, at the bottom are women as members of the electorate, participating in elections as single-time voters. The number of women voters is the largest in this participatory model and, as noted, is now almost at par with that of Indian men. The democratic right to vote is gender-neutral, yet the top layers of this model point towards exclusionary patterns when providing spaces to women to participate as candidates in elections. It is hypothesised that this is causally related to women's structured marginalisation within the political parties in India. In this regard, Sirsikar (1979: 82) pointedly reports:

... everyone knows that, by and large, most political leaders are not very enthusiastic about the participation of women. This could be seen from the membership of the Constituent Assembly—women were there on sufferance. The Constitution-makers recognized the Schedules Castes as weaker sections of the society and provided for them reserved seats, both in the legislatures and in the services. Their failure to recognize women as a weaker section was obviously a result of the predominant male composition of the Constituent Assembly. Women were given equal rights in voting. But, this did not mean much as it was next to impossible for women to compete for political power through elections.

An analysis of the representation levels of women in India's Lower House compared with women in other South Asian countries would be relevant here but is not pursued.

Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) suggest higher levels for Nepal, Afghanistan and Pakistan, mainly due to reservations of seats for women. Lack of reservation of seats for Indian women in legislative assemblies, combined with several inherent societal and attitudinal factors, seems to act as a gender barrier and major obstacle to participation in electoral competitions and occupying legislative space on equal terms with men. Even today, Indian women are still not well represented in political life as members in Parliament and in state legislative assemblies, which would require activities in the public sphere. As Table 1 shows, women's representation in the Lok Sabha since 1952 reveals a pattern of gross exclusion from electoral participation at the top, even after 70 years of independence. The 4.4 per cent women members of the Lower House in 1952 increased significantly to 11.2 per cent in 2014, but this remains below the world average (Swarup et al., 1994). The significant rise in the number of women representatives elected to the Lok Sabha in 2009 as compared with 2004 had important symbolic connotations for the future of women's politics, but had not much to do with effective political mobilisation of women in the 2009 elections (Deshpande, 2009).

The manifold reasons for such consistently poor representations of Indian women could be attributed to socio-historic forces inherited from nationalist movements, current social policies and the gendered nature of citizenship. All are hampering women's political participation in government structures, elections and community organisations (Vissandjée et al., 2006). Further arguments concern the absence of seat reservations for women in the Parliament and state legislatures, lack of national consensus and unwillingness among political parties to give more tickets to women (Basu, 1992). Perpetuation of patriarchal political structures, acting together with class, caste and gender subordination as strong deterrents for women to contest elections, are identified in the Baseline Report (1998). Lack of awareness and knowledge of electoral politics combined with insufficient support from family and political parties in terms of resources also severely affects women's chances to contest and win elections (Rai, 2011). While there are many factors, the under-representation of women in the Lower House can clearly be narrowed down to gender discriminatory policies followed by national/regional parties in allotting seats to women in electoral competitions.

In the second stratum of women's participatory model are women as candidates of political parties in elections. Here, similar inherent barriers and restrictions operate, imposed by political parties, severely restricting women's chances of active interactions and winning elections. This becomes fairly evident through a numerical analysis of the number of seats allotted to women by prominent political parties in the last three general elections (see Table 2).

Table 2 shows that the number of women candidates from various minor parties who contested Lok Sabha elections has more than doubled from 280 in 2004 to 574 in 2014. But the number of women candidates fielded by national parties, except for the BJP in 2009, has remained almost the same during this period. Thus, political parties have continued their discriminatory gender-exclusionist policy in allotting

Table 2. Seats Allotted to Women in Recent General Elections

National Parties	2004		2009		2014	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
All India	355	45	556	59	668	61
Congress	45	12	43	23	57	4
BJP	30	10	44	13	37	28
Others	280	23	469	23	574	29

Source: Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

seats to women in Lok Sabha elections over the years, discouraging active female participation in formal politics.

Political decisions of not allotting seats to women by political parties in national and state-level electoral competitions have been attributed to women's lack of 'winning ability' (Deshpande, 2004: 5433). However, an analysis of victory ratings of women candidates in Indian general elections as compared with men reveals significantly higher female success rates in the last three general elections. In the 2014 national hustings, women's success rate was 9 per cent, compared with 6 per cent for men. This demolishes any apprehensions by political parties for not allotting enough seats to women in elections on winning ability, also debunking other reasons, such as not getting the right candidates. The lack of support for women by political parties is corroborated when Kishwar (1996) argues that in India, even the best women parliamentarians feel sidelined and powerless within their respective political parties, so that the few women leaders remain an ineffective minority unable to facilitate the entry of greater numbers of women in electoral and party politics. She recommends that through amending India's Representation of the People Act of 1951, parties should be compelled to allocate at least one-third of tickets to women.

Though women head a significant number of national and state-level political parties, the overall representation of women within the rank and file of these political parties remains dismal. Women who made their presence felt in the inner political party circles have been relegated to the second rung of leadership and have failed to break the 'glass ceiling'. Rarely playing any role in formulating policies and strategies in political parties, they are at best assigned the job of keeping an eye on 'women's issues' to bring electoral dividends for the party. Women's under-representation in the Lower House and the trivialisation of women in political parties lead also to collateral effects when it comes to allotting cabinet berths in the central government. The first central government formed in independent India had one woman among 20 cabinet ministers. The situation did change thereafter, however, and the current central government has six women as cabinet ministers out of a total of 23, increasing the representation of women in the Union Cabinet impressively from 5 per cent in 1947 to 26 per cent in 2014. However, this does by far not mirror the gender demographics.

In formal politics, at the third level of the electoral participation model is the engagement of women in election campaigns soliciting votes for political parties. This participation of women involves multiple interactions, time-intensive activities and moving in public spaces outside the household. Indian political parties in recent times use power-packed election campaigns and rely heavily on print, electronic and social media to publicise their agenda among the electorate. However, traditional election campaign methods, such as holding rallies and meetings, distributing party leaflets, door-to-door canvassing by party workers and supporters and roadshows by party leaders, remain popular vehicles in reaching voters. The archives of the last three general elections in India reveal that women have been more actively participating in election campaigns, but their levels of participation need to be numerically fathomed to get a fair assessment of their active involvement in this process.

With the purpose of analysing the levels and trends of women's participation in electoral competitions as campaigners in the last decade, an Electoral Participation Index was created from women who participated in certain activities in the National Election Study (NES) 2009 data set: women who attended election meetings, participated in election rallies and meetings and door-to-door canvassing, made donations to parties and distributed party agenda leaflets. The participation levels of women in election campaigns were indexed into two categories: low for women who participated in one or two activities and high for women who participated in three or more activities.

Table 3 indicates that the number of women with high participation levels in election campaigns increased substantially from 13 per cent in the 1999 general elections to 22 per cent in the Lok Sabha Elections of 2009. This confirms that relatively more Indian women are now actively participating in high-voltage campaign activities of party dispensations that are more time-consuming, as compared with simply voting. One of the main reasons for this increased participation of women in campaign activities is higher mobilisation by political parties and inclusion of women in their campaign programmes. It seems that political parties are quite keen to treat women as constituencies and campaigners, yet still run shy in allotting adequate seat numbers to them in elections and in sharing political power (Kishwar, 1996). The 2009 general elections marked a significant leap in women's participation as enthusiastic and opinionated campaigners in electoral competition.

Table 3. **Women as Voters and Election Campaigners**

Levels of Participation	NES 1999	NES 2009	Increase/Decrease (%)
Non-voters	47	44	-3
Voters	53	56	+2
Low Campaigners	87	78	-9
High Campaigners	13	22	+9

Sources: CSDS (1999, 2009).

The skewed representation of women in electoral politics in India at the top levels of the participatory model has remained in the background mainly due to the upsurge witnessed in the 1990s among women as voters (Yadav, 2000). Though there was a slight decrease in voting by women in the general elections of 2004 as compared with 1999, women's participation in the electoral process as voters has steadily increased from 46.6 per cent in 1962 to around 65.6 per cent in 2014. The difference in voter turnout among men and women that was as wide as 16.7 per cent in 1962 has now narrowed to 1.54 per cent in 2014 (Table 4). The manifold reasons for the upsurge of women's participation as voters, which reached an all-time high in the Lok Sabha Elections of 2014, can be primarily attributed to five reasons: First, the liberalisation and opening up of the Indian economy in the 1990s resulted in proliferation of electronic media, creating awareness and educating women about their political and electoral rights. Second, civil society and women's group awareness campaigns and advocacy at grassroots level encouraged and educated women about the importance of voting for the right candidates and political parties. Third, the initiatives of the Election Commission of India in conducting free, fair and violence-free elections in the 1990s may have contributed to larger female turnouts, inculcating a sense of safety and security. Fourth, the reservation of 33 per cent seats for women at the PRIs in the 1990s gave women a sense of sharing power with men equally. It acted as a catalyst and provided the momentum which resulted in the upsurge of women's electoral participation. Finally, according to Vissandjée et al. (2006), the earlier dominant perception that women generally see politics as dirty and tend to stay away from it (Kishwar, 1996) saw a meltdown in this period as a result of women's reservation and participation in large numbers at the grassroots level of PRIs. Success stories of women in panchayats dispelled to some extent the perception that politics is not a women's domain.

Table 4 below indicates how the Election Commission of India, civil society and political parties all played a role in creating awareness among voters that led to the highest female turnout so far in the general elections of 2014, narrowing the gender gap of participation.

Determinants of Women's Participation in an Electoral Contest

The assessment of crucial factors that determine the participation levels of women in India's politics, such as voting and campaigning, is also based on the NES data for 2009 and a women's Electoral Participation Index created from these NES data sets at CSDS. Female participation levels in formal politics are determined by various factors, some universal and gender specific, while others are country specific and localised in nature. In India and elsewhere, it has been suggested that women's participation in electoral competitions is generally lower than that of men either because they have been socialised differently, especially as far as marriage, motherhood, employment and property ownership are concerned, or because they have fewer resources

Table 4. **Turnout of Women Voters in General Elections in India**

General Elections	Total Turnout	Men's Turnout	Women's Turnout	Difference in Turnout
First (1952)	61.2	—	—	—
Second (1957)	62.2	—	—	—
Third (1962)	55.4	63.3	46.6	16.7
Fourth (1967)	61.3	66.7	55.5	11.2
Fifth (1971)	55.3	60.9	49.1	11.8
Sixth (1977)	60.5	66.0	54.9	11.1
Seventh (1980)	56.9	62.2	51.2	11.0
Eighth (1984)	64.0	68.4	59.2	9.2
Ninth (1989)	62.0	66.1	57.3	8.8
Tenth (1991)	57.0	61.6	51.4	10.2
Eleventh (1996)	58.0	62.1	53.4	8.7
Twelfth (1998)	62.0	66.0	58.0	8.0
Thirteenth (1999)	60.0	64.0	55.7	8.3
Fourteenth (2004)	58.8	61.7	53.3	8.4
Fifteenth (2009)	58.2	60.2	55.8	4.4
Sixteenth (2014)	66.4	67.1	65.6	1.5

Source: Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

(Burns, Scholzman & Sidney, 2001). Similarly, socio-economic demographics of women and gender-specific reasons have been mostly cited by researchers as factors that determine their level of participation in the electoral process at the various tiers. The visible upsurge of women as voters in elections, achieving near parity with male voters recently, seems to be determined by several factors influencing the engagement and non-engagement of women in the voting process. A key factor that propels a large number of women to vote in general elections is apparently their interest in politics. Table 5 establishes that 9 out of 10 women interested in politics voted in the general elections 2009, compared with those who seemed disinterested in politics.

Individual socio-demographic factors including education and income, sociocultural norms and caste are also associated with women's opportunities for political participation (Agarwal, 1997; Banerjee, 2003; Gleason, 2001). Women's involvement in electoral politics depends upon their societal background and the levels of liberty and freedom they enjoy. Women who exercise their own discretion in deciding whom to vote for have higher levels of electoral participation as voters in electoral competitions than those governed by family and peer groups. The former had a 6 per cent higher voting rate in the 2009 general elections than women whose choices were influenced by others. The main attitudinal factor that seems to drive Indian women to cast their

Table 5. Key Determinants of Women's Participation in Voting

Factors	Voting Participation (%)	
	Vote	Do not Vote
Interest in politics	91	09
No interest in politics	80	20
Own voting decision	88	10
Not own voting decision	82	18
Vote is important	89	11
Vote is not important	76	24
Rural location	86	14
Urban location	78	22
Southern region	91	09
Eastern region	86	14
Western region	83	17
Northern region	76	24

Source: CSDS (2009).

votes is the perception that their vote matters in electing a good government. Thus, 89 per cent of women who gave primacy to their voting rights voted in the 2009 general elections in India as compared with 76 per cent who felt that their vote did not matter in choosing a government.

Voting patterns of women in India are also determined by location and spatial factors. Table 5 above also reveals that women living in rural areas vote in higher numbers than women in urban and metropolitan locations, with rural women ahead by 8 per cent in the 2009 general elections. The reasons for lower voter turnout among urban women in India have been sociologically researched and can be broadly put down to time and monetary constraints in reaching polling booths in urban locations (Rai, 2011). Notably, women in the southern and eastern regions of India exercise their ballot options more than women in the western and northern regions. More women from the southern (91 per cent) and eastern (86 per cent) regions voted in 2009 compared with their counterparts in the other two regions. The reasons for such spatial variations in voting could be many, but may partly be explained by the more matriarchal social structures prevalent in India's southern and eastern regions. Such familial structures allow more freedom to women also in accessing and negotiating interactions in the public sphere and in electoral competitions.

The participatory upsurge among women in Lok Sabha elections is complemented by increased participation of women in election campaigns, which grew from 13 per cent in the 1999 general elections to 22 per cent in the 2009 Elections. This suggests that

relatively more Indian women are now actively participating in campaign activities during elections, engaging in more intensive, competitive and multiple interactions in the electoral space as compared with just voting. The main reason for increased participation in campaign activities has been, as noted, greater mobilisation efforts by political parties seeking to include women in their campaign programmes. Other factors could have assisted in establishing higher participation rates of women in election campaigns and it would be relevant to ascertain if these variables are similar for women who vote or whether they are distinctly divergent.

The interest of women in politics emerges as the key factor determining their participation levels in election campaigns. Women with interest in politics had higher levels of participation (43 per cent) in election campaigning in the 2009 general elections compared with women who were not interested in politics but still campaigned for various political outfits (12 per cent). These findings corroborate earlier research with similar outcomes (Burns, Scholzman & Sidney, 2001). It is well acknowledged that better educated women, those who are employed, women of higher social standing or social class, and urban women, are more likely to be interested as well as more active in politics. This observation is supported (see Table 6) as women who are employed have higher participation rates in election campaigns (23 per cent) compared with women who are not employed (16 per cent). These findings are further substantiated by earlier research results showing that Indian women have less education than men. Since they are also less likely to be in the workforce, women may be less politically active than men (Gleason, 2001).

Table 6. **Key Determinants of Women's Participation in Election Campaigns**

Factors	Participation in Campaign (%)	
	Low	High
Interest in politics	57	43
No interest in politics	88	12
High media exposure	72	28
No media exposure	86	14
High social networking	78	22
Low social networking	87	13
Employed	77	23
Unemployed	84	16
Eastern region	71	29
Northern region	84	16
Southern region	81	19
Western region	88	12

Source: CSDS (2009).

In a pluralistic society like India, the media is now a major communication tool for political and social outfits to reach target groups and forge strategic alliances (Palshikar & Kumar, 2004: 5416) and this can be credited for the increased participation of women in electoral campaigns (Deshpande, 2004: 5432). However, there is no authentic data to quantify the correlation of media exposure of women and their increased participation in election campaigns. A Media Exposure Index was therefore created by the author, using NES 2009 data which include a combination of variables on newspaper reading habits, listening to radio news and watching news on television. Women's media exposure was indexed into three categories: low for women who were sometimes exposed to any one medium only and never others, medium for women who were sometimes exposed to two or three media and high for women who were mostly exposed to three or more media.

Table 6 reveals that women with high media exposure also had higher participation rates in election campaigns (28 per cent) compared with women with zero exposure to media (14 per cent). Thus, women with greater access and exposure to media for information about politics are not only more aware about their political and electoral rights but also more willing to participate in electoral politics (Rai, 2011). Rural or urban women in India are generally part of social networking groups, such as ladies clubs, local religious congregations and other self-help groups. Women with higher social networking ratings (22 per cent) showed a higher involvement in election campaign activities in the 2009 general elections compared with women with low social networking ratings (13 per cent).

Regarding the many relevant determinants of behaviour and attitude, as well as demographic variables that influence participatory levels of women in electoral competitions as voters and campaigners, it becomes imperative to statistically segregate the most important determinants of women's participation in the electoral engagements by using a regression model. A logistical regression of women voters as a dependent variable by independent variables, such as women's interest in politics, own voting decision, awareness that her vote matters, media exposure, social networking, locality, language and region, reveals that among attitudinal variables, awareness that her vote matters is one of the best predictors of women who voted in the 2009 general elections. The second best predictor of a high degree of women's participation in voting is interest in politics. While this has been observed earlier (Deshpande, 2004: 5433), it was found that women who decided on their own whom to vote for participated in higher numbers in the 2009 elections. Among the demographic variables, the rural–urban divide is a significant predictor of the voting intensity by women. The reasons why women living in rural areas voted more in the 2009 general elections compared to urban women could be manifold, but lower participation in electoral politics is a common phenomenon among urban voters in India, and urban women are no exception.

The logistical regression of women campaigners as a dependent variable by independent determinants confirms that among attitudinal variables, interest in politics

is one of the strongest predictors for women who campaigned in the 2009 general elections. Social networking of women was the second best predictor of women's participation during the 2009 elections followed by media exposure. This clearly shows that larger numbers of women with higher social networking rates and exposure to media participate in election campaigning. The factors that determined and best predicted women's participation as voters, such as 'vote matters' and 'own decision', were not statistically significant in determining their participation in election campaign activities (Rai, 2011). Among the demographic variables, women's participation in election campaigns is also determined by a linguistic divide as a significant predictor. Women whose mother tongue was not Hindi had higher participation rates in election campaigns in the 2009 general elections compared with women speaking Hindi. Similarly, the employment status of women is a crucial factor, as employed women participated more in election campaigning than those who were not employed.

Barriers to Women's Participation in Elections

While the Constitution of India grants universal suffrage with equal rights to both men and women, existing societal values, the private–public divide in terms of domain identification and male preponderance in political institutions create roadblocks for women for exercising electoral rights and equal participation in elections. The lack of critical and quality representation of women in key decision-making positions results in women's agenda not getting reflected and addressed in public policies and programmes (Baseline Report, 1998). The public agenda of Indian men and women elected as people's representatives is quite different and their priority of public works undertaken is also dissimilar. While elected women representatives addressed issues of long-term benefits, such as education, health, violence against women and basic amenities that affect the community, men concentrated on issues that needed immediate attention, such as roads, community and commercial centres, tanks and bridges (National Institute of Advanced Studies, 2002–03).

It may be argued that if there had been significant numbers of women representatives in India's Parliament, they could have played a crucial concerted role in getting the Bill to introduce 33 per cent reservation for women in state legislatures and Parliament enacted. The absence of a critical mass of female representatives also reduces their bargaining and negotiating power during the allotment of key cabinet berths in India, such as finance, home, defence and health, which are generally given to men and considered heavyweight ministries. Indian women are mostly allotted ministries during cabinet formation which are termed as 'feminine' portfolios, such as women and children, information and culture and social welfare, perceived as relatively less important, with fewer resources and reach among citizens (Kishwar, 1996: 2870). Thus, women active in politics in India are relegated to the fringes in power sharing at the top level, with adverse impacts on their overall political status in the country, acting as a barrier to higher electoral participation (Rai, 2011).

Kishwar (1996: 2870–71) shows that leading Indian female politicians, such as Indira Gandhi or Mayawati, have actually shown aversion to sharing the limelight with other women politicians. The low proportion of women in the inner political party structure of India further erodes women's efforts to lobby and garner resources and support for nurturing and building their political constituencies as well as mobilising financial and human resources required to meet people's demands and aspirations. This inevitably results in women being perceived as weak representatives and generally unacceptable as political leaders. At times, being in insignificant numbers may put them in a vulnerable position, resulting in alliances along caste, religion and regional identities rather than along common gendered interests (Baseline Report, 1998). Thus, Indian women as people's representatives in public life often become co-opted into male-centric structures of development agenda. At the PRI grassroots levels, too, there have been strong obstacles to women's entry into politics, even a backlash of violence to keep them away from electoral politics has been noted (Baseline Report, 1998).

Overall, the absence of affirmative action of 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in the national and state legislatures has had a negative impact on the political status of women in India. However, treating women as a blanket category for reservation would cause further complications, as the benefits would largely be appropriated by women who belong to political families or the upper strata of society. Hence, women from lower economic strata, backward castes and marginalised groups would face further exclusion from contesting elections and sharing political power. Disadvantaged sections of women in India who are denied the political right to participate in elections as candidates arising out of their situational deficiencies and lack of resources would then be further relegated into political oblivion.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The democratic upsurge that started in India is likely to continue and despite some limitations of the electoral process, 'people have succeeded in instituting their own democratic meaning in this process' (Palshikar & Kumar, 2004: 5417). The increased participation of women in formal politics reveals a process of feminisation of Indian politics with positive, people-driven developments that augur well for Indian women and for India. The participatory upsurge among women voters that started in the 1990s reached its crescendo in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections with a 65.6 per cent female turnout. The difference in male and female voter turnout has slimmed down to 1.5 per cent by 2014. This narrowing gender gap establishes beyond doubt that more women are exercising their electoral rights. Similarly, women's participation in election campaigns increased significantly between 1999 and 2014. However, it is equally clear that this feminisation of Indian politics is being resisted by the male-dominated political establishment and party personnel, apparatuses and procedures.

The women's movement and gender politics in India remain currently divided over the question of affirmative action for women in the Parliament and state legislatures

which centres around two main issues: first, overlapping quotas for women in general and women of lower castes. Second, concerns over elitism loom in the background. Given the electoral activism shown by Indian women themselves, however, affirmative action for women in legislative bodies seems to be the need of the hour and would go a long way in removing many obstacles that still inhibit women's participation in election competitions, bridging the existing gaps in electoral and political set-ups and improving the political representation of and by women in India. The political parties that played a destructive role in scuttling the Women's Reservation Bill in the last Lok Sabha have become redundant after the general elections in 2014. The current government has given a positive signal for women-inclusive politics, providing six cabinet ministerial positions to women, raising hopes that it would build an all-party consensus and pass the long-standing Bill in due course.

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