

Gendered political exclusion: Crucial implications for Indian democracy

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Based on primary and secondary sources, this paper attempts to ascertain the underlying patterns and themes of women's political participation and their levels of inclusion or exclusion from the political process. A balance sheet of gender participation in formal politics reveals that there has been marked increase in voting turnout and election campaigning among women although they still continue to be excluded from legislative bodies at national and state level and deprived from key decision making positions in government and political parties.

Field-based research shows 'interest in politics' as the key determinant and one of the best predictors of women's levels of political participation. Among other factors that seem to determine the intensity of women's formal participation in politics, 'media exposure' - proxy for awareness - emerges as important variable.

The key areas that need to be addressed for improving political participation of women and inclusion in the political process are affirmative action, better representation in legislative bodies and political parties, particularly in the decision making bodies as well as cabinet berths in government at centre and state level in partnership with civil society.

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INTRODUCTION

The political status of women in any society can be defined not only as equality and freedom with which they share power with men, but also the value society places on the role of women in politics. It is an important indicator of the working and functioning of true democracy in any country. The Constitution of free India promulgated in 1950 promised 'to secure to all its citizens justice, social, economic and political' and 'equality of status and of opportunity' (Basu 1998:21) and yet women, despite their constituting nearly half of the population, continue to be grossly underrepresented in parliament and the state assemblies. Statistics available show that women's representation in the Lok Sabha has not yet reached the world average of 10 per cent representation of women in the House of Representatives failing thus to acquire the 'critical mass' required for influencing decision-making at the top legislative and executive levels. Similarly, women continue to be marginalised in most of the prominent political parties in the country not only in terms of seat allotments in elections, but also within the party structure and hierarchy. This could be attributed to a large extent to India's democratic process that is fraught with inherent dynamics and contradictions that exclude women from sharing power as equals with men. In contrast to women's poor participation rates as candidates in the electoral fray and within party ranks and file, women's participation as voters has seen a remarkable upsurge in the late 1990s as voter turnout figures of General Elections held in this decade clearly reveal.

Overall, the political participation of women in India is a contested issue and opinion is quite varied and divergent. There are competing arguments about the levels and patterns of women's participation in the political process in the country. On one hand, some theorise that the democratic process is fraught with inherent dynamics and contradictions that exclude women from sharing power as equals with men. That is, the lack of political voice and poor representation of women in parliament is a result of exclusions on gender basis (Agarwal 2006). On the other hand we have theorists who feel that the growing political participation of women over the years and sharing of political power by women at various levels reflects that politics in India is not gender exclusive but rather inclusive. They argue that due to the strength and determination of women's movements across India, as well as government-regulated quotas, women's presence in the political arena is increasing, particularly in terms of women's voting patterns and decision-making power, as well as in women's access to

positions in public office (Locke 1998; Vyasulu and Vyasulu 1999; Ahern *et al.*, 2000; Banerjee 2003).

It is within this framework that the ensuing analysis, based on primary and secondary sources, will try to ascertain the underlying patterns and themes of women's political participation and their levels of inclusion or exclusion from the political process. The paper is divided into six sections which are as follows: Section I provides the definition and indicators of women's political participation; Section II assesses gender exclusion in political participation from a historical perspective to map the beginning of women's participation in political activities and stages of exclusion or inclusion with the passage of time. Section III is about the trends and temporal patterns in political participation of women since first the General Elections as voters, representation in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament), as candidates of political parties and their levels of exclusion. For a comparative analysis, this section also focuses on the political participation of women in the Indian parliament vis-à-vis women in parliament of other countries of South Asia. Section IV is the most important section of the paper as it tries to find out the main determinants of women's participation in the electoral process quantitatively. It also attempts to ascertain which are the best indicators of women's participation and their levels in formal politics. Section V tries to qualitatively analyse the impact of women's exclusion from politics on women and the future of Indian democracy. Section VI is the last section that concludes the paper and suggests the way ahead for women's enhanced participation in the political process and their political empowerment.

DEFINITION AND INDICATORS OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The definition of political participation of women in broad terms entails a wide range of activities such as participating in trade unions, cooperatives, women's collectives, informal and formal political processes. Political participation has been defined as a citizen's active involvement with public institutions, which may include voting, candidacy, campaigning, occupying political office and/or lobbying individually or through membership in a group (Arora 1999; Gleason 2001). However, in this paper it is used in a much narrower sense to include women's participation only in formal/electoral politics at the levels of State Legislatures and Parliament. Women's participation at grass root level of *Panchayati Raj* Institutions have not been delved into as affirmative action for providing reservations to them has corrected the gender exclusions and disparity to a large extent.

The political status and empowerment of women in India and the efficacy of the instrument of political rights in achieving the general equality of status will be evaluated and assessed on the following parameters:

1. Participation in the Political Process – The turnout of women voters, the number of women candidates in General Elections held in independent India with special emphasis on General Elections 2004 based on data from Election Commission of India.
2. Political Attitudes and Behaviour - The level of political awareness, commitment and involvement of women participating in politics, their autonomy and independence in political behaviour and preferences and as active campaigners during elections. As discussed in the relevant section, the data for this analysis are drawn from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) Data Unit.
3. Impact of Women in the Political Process – The assessment of women's views of their own roles and efficiency in the political process and society's attitude to new political roles of women. This is indicated by the success of the women candidates at elections, the efficiency of women's pressure groups, the nature of leadership and women elected in government and political parties and the effectiveness of campaigns for women's mobilisation particularly on issues that directly concern them. Since quantitative data is not available to gauge the impact of women in the political process it will be more qualitative and based on gender analysis.

It may be pointed out that empirical data for women's participation in India are mostly available for state and national level elections. The CSDS data is therefore used to capture the grass root participation in a qualitative manner so as to provide a more comprehensive picture about women's levels and patterns of political participation and exclusion.

GENDERED EXCLUSION IN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: AN OVERVIEW

This section provides a brief sketch of the historical background of women's participation in politics as a backdrop, both chronologically and thematically, for subsequent discussion.

It may perhaps be argued that the British rule marks the formal recognition and beginning of change in the pathetic status of women in India vis-à-vis society and nation when James Mill observed in

1817 that the condition of women in a society is an index of its place in civilisation (Mill 1817) writing 'women' into the project of modernity and modern history in India. Overall, the roots of women's participation in politics can be traced back to the nineteenth century reform movement in which several eminent women reformers participated (Chattopadhyaya 1983). Their activities not only gave momentum to women's participation in public spaces, but also highlighted their entry into the independence struggle and political domain in the long run. The *Swadeshi* movement in Bengal (1905-8) marked the beginning of women's participation in nationalist activities although initially a large number of women were from families involved in nationalist politics. The base broadened with middle class women's entry into the movement as they took active part in the boycott of foreign goods and in revolutionary activities during this period. The movement for independence also gave rise to the question of women's suffrage and voting rights. During the same period several all-India women's associations came into existence (mostly called *Mahila Samitis*) for the purpose of women's upliftment and advancement (Chattopadhyaya 1983). From the 1920s, the Indian National Congress began to forge links with women's organisations in order to demonstrate its mass support to the British Government. The partition of Bengal (1905) also attracted women in large numbers including uneducated rural women into its fold.

Mahatma Gandhi extended the logic of the feminist mode of protest to the nationalist movement. His emphasis on *Satyagraha* and passive resistance in which women participated in large numbers created spaces for women and thousands of women joined in Mahatma Gandhi's salt *Satyagraha* that could be termed as the first mass movement of Indian women in the independence struggle (Kumar 1997). The active participation of women in the political struggles for independence eventually resulted in framing of a Constitution based on the principles of equality and guaranteeing universal suffrage to both men and women in 1947. Though the foundation for political participation of women was laid down during the freedom movement, post-independence did not witness much concerted or united effort to create inclusive political spaces for women. By and large, women's participation after Independence was constrained by social norms shaping not only opportunities for, but also perceptions of, women's involvement in politics - perceptions that 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. Their involvement in politics became confined to familial connections rather than based on interest and societal encouragement to actively participate in politics. Also, political parties that were reflecting the prevailing societal ethos failed to address and systematically excluded women from political participation (Baseline Report 1998). However, as tokens for their contribution in the struggle for India's independence political parties allotted them a few seats in General Elections. This becomes evident from the first Lok Sabha Elections held in 1952 where women could win and occupy a paltry 4.4 per cent of the total seats in the lower house. Even now, despite the constitutional provisions guaranteeing equality of sexes, political participation of women in terms of legislative or decision-making bodies is quite low and they continue to remain marginalised and under represented. The demand for greater representation of women in political institutions in India was taken up seriously after the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) published its report in 1976. The CSWI report suggested that women's representation in political institutions especially at the grass-roots level needed to be increased through a policy of reservation of seats for women. In 1988, the National Perspective Plan for Women also suggested that a 30 per cent quota for women be introduced at all levels of elective bodies. Women's groups and gender politics strictly insisted that reservation be restricted to the *Panchayat* level to encourage grass-roots participation in 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. In 1995 the question of affirmative action for women was raised again, but this time the focus was on reservations for women in parliament. Initially, most political parties agreed in principle to this demand, but soon discord and dissensions surfaced. When the bill addressing this issue was introduced in the Eleventh Parliament in 1997, several parties and groups raised objections. The objections focused around two main issues: first, the issue of overlapping quotas for women in general and those for women of the lower castes; and second, the issue of elitism. The proposed bill is still gathering dust and is yet to be passed by parliament.

The following section delves into the issues more specifically.

TRENDS IN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN AND THEIR LEVELS OF EXCLUSION

Prior to analysing trends in Indian polity, it would be of interest to see how Indian women fare as compared with women in other countries of Asia. A look at Table 1 reveals that India figures at the bottom of the table among South Asian countries ahead of Sri Lanka only in terms of women's representation in the lower house of parliament. The representation of women in the lower house of Afghanistan is the highest (27 per cent) among the countries of the region that witnessed its first parliamentary elections after the downfall of Taliban rule in the country. Apart from Afghanistan, only Iraq (25.45 per cent) and Pakistan (21.35 per cent) are the two countries in the region where women representatives occupy more than 20 per cent seats in the lower house of the parliament. The reason for higher representation of women in the lower house of parliament in Afghanistan and countries ranked higher than India is mainly due to reservation of seats for women. Thus, India and Sri Lanka are the two countries in the region where women's representation in the parliament is below the world average of 10 per cent representation of women in the House of Representatives.

TABLE 1
Representation of women members in lower house in South Asia, 2006

<i>Country</i>	<i>Total Seats</i>	<i>Won by Women</i>	<i>%</i>
Afghanistan	249	68	27.31
Pakistan	342	73	21.35
Nepal	329	57	17.33
Bangladesh	345	51	14.78
India	545	48	8.26
Sri Lanka	225	11	4.89

Source: Website of Bangladesh Government

An analysis of political participation of women in the Indian elections both as candidates in the electoral fray in terms of their winnability vis-à-vis men and as voters and campaigners for political parties will reveal participatory trends and their exclusion from the political process. Accordingly, Tables 2 and 3 provide women's participation in formal politics, both as candidates and voters and also patterns of women's participation during election campaign.

TABLE 2
Turnout of women in General Elections - 1st to 14th Lok Sabha

<i>General Elections</i>	<i>Total Turnout</i>	<i>Men's Turnout</i>	<i>Women's Turnout</i>	<i>Difference in Turnout</i>
First (1952)	44.8	-	-	-
Second (1957)	45.4	-	-	-
Third (1962)	55.4	62.0	46.6	15.4
Fourth (1967)	61.3	66.7	55.5	11.2
Fifth (1971)	55.3	60.9	49.1	11.8
Sixth (1977)	60.5	66.6	54.9	11.7
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	56.9	9.2
Tenth (1991)	61.0	61.6	51.4	10.2
Eleventh (1996)	57.9	62.1	53.4	8.7
Twelfth (1998)	62.0	66.2	57.9	8.3
Thirteenth (1999)	60.4	64.0	55.6	8.4
Fourteenth (2004)	58.3	61.9	53.5	8.4

Source: Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

An assessment of women's participation in the political process as voters reveals that it has been low in all general elections held till now as compared to men. However, their participation over the years has steadily increased from 46.6 per cent in 1962 to 53.5 per cent in the year 2004. The difference in voter turnout between men and women that was as high as 15.4 per cent in 1962 has narrowed down to 8.4 per cent in 2004. Despite the difference remaining significant, there was not only a definite participatory upsurge among Indian woman in the 1990s, but also in their turnout (Yadav 2000). In fact, the General Elections in 1998 had witnessed the highest voter turnout among women.

What are the reasons for the upsurge of women's participation as voters in the General Elections held in 1990s? The reasons could be: Firstly, the liberalisation of the economy in the 1990s witnessed a proliferation of electronic media creating awareness and educating women about their political and electoral rights. This proposition, however, needs to be empirically researched. Secondly, civil society and women's group awareness campaigns and advocacy at grass root levels encouraged and educated women about their voting rights and importance of vote in electing the right candidates and political parties. Thirdly, Election Commission of India initiatives in conducting free, fair and violence free elections may have contributed in larger women turnout as it inculcated a sense of safety

and security among them. The reservation of 33 per cent seats for women at the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the 1990s gave women in the country a sense of sharing power with men equally. It may have acted as a catalyst and resulted in the upsurge of women's political participation as voters. Finally, the dominant perception (Vissandjée *et al.*, 2006.) that women generally think that politics is a dirty word and tend to stay away from it also saw a meltdown in this period as a result of women's reservation and participation in large numbers at the grass roots level (PRIs). The success stories of women in panchayats dispelled, to some extent, the perception among women that politics is dirty.

TABLE 3**Representation of women members in Lower House - 1st to 14th Lok Sabha**

<i>Lok Sabha</i>	<i>Total no. of seats (Elections Held)</i>	<i>No. of women members who won</i>	<i>% of the Total</i>
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

Note: * Including one nominated member

Source: Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

As seen, over years, a large proportion of women have turned up to vote to reduce the gender gap to less than 10 per cent in the 1990s from almost 20 per cent in 1971. Yet, women are still not well represented in political life as members in Parliament and in State Legislative Assemblies that would require them to be active in the public sphere (Chhibber 2002). Women's representation in the Lok Sabha since the first general elections reveals that they continue to be grossly excluded even after so many years of Independence. In 1952, they

constituted 4.4 per cent of the total seats in the lower house; by 2004 their share doubled to 8 per cent and stabilised at that in the last 3 Lok Sabhas - still below the world average of 10 per cent representation of women in the House of Representatives.

The question as to what are the reasons for under-representation of Indian women in the lower house of the parliament by itself and also in comparison with other countries in South Asia is an intriguing one. Though there are many factors that act as barriers for women's political participation leading to poor representation in parliament and state legislatures, the main factors could be attributed to a) socio-historic forces inherited from nationalist movements, current social policies and the gendered nature of citizenship in hampering women's political participation in government structures, elections and community organisations (Vissandjée *et al.*, 2006); b) absence of legislation to reserve seats for women in the parliament and state legislatures; c) the lack of national consensus and willingness among political parties to give more tickets to women in elections (Basu 1992); and d) perpetuation of patriarchic political structure together with class, caste and gender subordination acting as strong deterrents for women to contest elections (CSDS Baseline Report 1998). Finally, the lack of awareness and knowledge of electoral politics combined with lack of support from family and political parties in terms of resources severely affects women's chances to contest and win elections. The complete lack of support to women by political parties is corroborated by Kishwar who states, "In our country, even the best of women parliamentarians feel sidelined and powerless within the party. The few women leaders have not been able to facilitate the entry of a greater number of women in electoral and party politics, and so remain an ineffective minority" (Kishwar 1996:2871). She recommends that in allocating tickets for elections, parties should be compelled to give at least one third of their tickets to women through amending the Representation of People Act.

A collective outcome of these hindrances and deterrents becomes evident by numerical analysis of the number of seats allotted to women in General Elections (Table 4). It can be seen that although the number of women candidates who contested the elections increased from 274 in General Elections held in 1999 to 355 in General Elections 2004, the number of women candidates fielded by national parties has remained almost stagnant during this intervening period. Thus, national

parties have followed an exclusionist policy for women in allotment of seats in elections for the Lok Sabha over the years for one reason or other. The policy of exclusion of women in granting seats at national and state level election is not only being done by national parties alone, but also by regional political parties of all hues and shades in the country.

TABLE 4
Women's exclusion from electoral participation by national parties

<i>National Parties</i>	<i>General Elections 1998</i>		<i>General Elections 1999</i>		<i>General Elections 2004</i>	
	<i>Contested</i>	<i>Won</i>	<i>Contested</i>	<i>Won</i>	<i>Contested</i>	<i>Won</i>
All India	274	43	284	49	355	45
Congress	38	10	51	41	45	12
BJP	32	15	25	15	30	10
CPI	6	2	4	1	2	-
CPM	8	3	5	3	8	5

Source: Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

It has been suggested that women's lack of 'winnability' (Deshpande 2004) often influence such political decisions. However, an analysis of success rates of women candidates as compared to men reveals that it has been higher in the last three general elections. For example, in 1999 national hustings women's success rate was 17 per cent as compared with men's success rate at 11 per cent - higher by six percentage points suggesting apprehensions on the part of political parties rather unfounded.

In formal politics, election campaign forms an integral part of the electoral process. Political parties in India now heavily rely on both print and electronic media to put forward their agenda among the voters during the time of elections. But still traditional campaign methods like holding rallies and meetings, door to door canvassing by party workers and supporters and road shows by party leaders remain the more popular means.

Women's participation in election campaigns is an important indicator. For analysing the trends of women's political participation as campaigners in the last two General Election a political participation index¹ based on following variables: attended election meetings, participated in rallies, door-to-door canvassing, donations to parties and distributing party agenda leaflets has been calculated.

Table 5 indicates that incidence of low participation of women in campaign activities has, in fact, dropped by 11 percentage points in General Elections of the year 2004 as compared to the General Elections of 1999.

TABLE 5
Increasing participation of women in election campaigns

<i>Levels of Participation</i>	<i>NES 99</i>	<i>NES 2004</i>	<i>Increase/Decrease (%)</i>
Low	91	80	- 11
Medium	6	13	+ 7
High	3	7	+ 4

Source: National Election Study 1999, 2004, CSDS Data Unit, Delhi.

On the other hand, however, the number of women with high levels of participation in election campaign increased from 3 per cent in 1999 General Elections to 7 per cent in the 2004 national hustings. This suggests that relatively more women are now actively participating in electoral politics during campaign activities and political parties are mobilising their support in large numbers. It seems that political parties are quite keen and enthusiastic in treating women as constituencies and campaigners, but run shy in allotting adequate number of seats to them in elections and in sharing political power (Kishwar 1996).

KEY DETERMINANTS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

As is clear from the earlier discussion, women's participation in formal politics is determined by many factors some of which are universal in nature while some are specific and localised to some countries. In India and elsewhere it has been suggested that women's participation is generally lower either because they have been socialised differently, especially as far as marriage, motherhood, employment, ownership are concerned or because they have fewer resources (Burns *et al.*, 2001). Similarly, socio-economic demographics of women and gender-specific reasons have been mostly cited in researches as factors that determine their level of participation in the political process.

Once again this section uses the political participation index based on the CSDS data in order to assess the main determinants of women's level of participation in formal politics. It is to be reiterated that political participation is restricted to women's participation in election campaign

activities during the General Elections of 2004. The key questions that need to be probed and addressed in this section are:

1. What are the key determinants that promote or act as hindrances in women's participation in the electoral process during elections?
2. Is it the patriarchal social structure and the freedom enjoyed by women that determines their levels of participation in formal politics?
3. Or is it the propagation of stereotypes that politics is not the domain of women or does not interest them that keeps them away from the political process?
4. Or are there deeper underlying determinants like their socio-economic background and psychography of women that plays a key role in their levels of participation and exclusion from the political process?
5. To what extent does women's interest in politics and exposure to media determine their participatory levels in formal politics?

One of the key factors that determine their high level of participation is women's interest in politics. Table 6 shows that women with interest in politics are also those who participate actively in the political process, i.e. about 18 per cent of women who had interest in politics also had high levels of political participation in the 2004 General Elections as compared with those who did not have interest in politics in general (3 per cent). Conversely, 89 per cent of women who were not interested in politics (apart from elections) reported low participation in the election campaigns. The findings are corroborated by earlier researches arriving at similar outcomes (Burns *et al.*, 2001). Thus, we can assume that women's interest in politics is a prerequisite in encouraging higher participation of women in formal politics.

Individual socio-demographics including education and income, social-cultural norms and caste are also associated with women's opportunities for political participation (Agarwal 1997; Gleason 2001; Banerjee 2003). Women's level of participation in electoral politics depends upon their societal background and the levels of liberty and freedom enjoyed by them. Thus, women who exercise their own discretion in deciding whom to vote for have a higher level of participation in electoral politics than those whose decisions are influenced by family and friends. Accordingly, women who decided whom to vote for on their own had three-percentage points higher political participation than women whose decisions were influenced by others.

TABLE 6
Key determinants of participation of women in elections

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Political Participation (Percent)</i>		
	<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
Interest in politics	59	23	18
No interest in politics	89	9	3
Own voting decisions	77	14	9
Voting decisions influenced by others	82	12	6
Working	78	13	9
Housewives	81	13	6
Educated	76	15	9
Uneducated	84	10	6

Source: National Election Study 2004, CSDS Data Unit, Delhi.

It is well acknowledged that more educated women, those who are employed, women of higher social standing (social class) and urban women are more likely to be interested as well as more active in politics (Chhibber 2002). Observations in Table 6 support this as women who are employed have higher participation in election campaigns (9 per cent) as compared with women who are not working (6 per cent). Similarly, women who are educated (9 per cent) have higher participation in election campaigns than those who are uneducated (6 per cent). The findings are supported by earlier reports as in India, women have less education than men and since they are also less likely to be in the workforce women may be less politically active than men (Gleason 2001). Although in some cases, differences are not very significant, they are suggestive of the potential roles that the demographic background of women can play in political participation of women in the electoral process.

In a pluralistic society like India, media is the major means for political and social groups to reach their audiences and build a rapport with them. Thus, media has come to occupy a significant role in our society in creating political and electoral awareness. The increased participation of women as voters and in election activities could be attributed to Indian media to some extent as data in Table 7 reveals. The success stories of women in grass root politics after reservations of seats for them played a key role in participatory upsurge witnessed in the last decade of the twentieth century. Media has been vociferous in campaigning for affirmative action for women not only at the grass roots level but also in parliament and state legislatures.

TABLE 7**Media exposure increases women's participation in elections**

<i>Levels of Media Exposure</i>	<i>Political Participation (Percent)</i>		
	<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
No exposure	85	10	5
Low exposure	77	14	9
Medium exposure	75	15	10
High exposure	70	17	13

Source: National Election Study 2004, CSDS Data Unit, Delhi.

How far does media exposure of women lead to their increased participation in the electoral process and to what extent it determines their levels of participation in election campaigns are the questions to which authors turn now. Media Exposure Index²² is a combination of newspaper reading habits, listening to news on radio and television. According to Table 7, women who had high exposure to media also had higher political participation levels (13 per cent) as compared with women who have no exposure to media (5 per cent). It is because women exposed to media are more aware about their political and electoral rights and are more willing to participate in the electoral process (CSDS Data Unit).

Thus, we see that there are a host of determinants like media exposure, interest in politics, voting discretion and socio-economic background that determine the levels of political participation among women. Which among these are the most important determinants of women's participation in the political process? A regression of political participation of women by determinants like media exposure, locality, occupation, interest in politics, influence in voting decisions, education and economic class reveals that, 'Interest in politics' is one of the best predictors of their levels of participation ($b = .412$, $\text{Sig.} = .000$). This implies that women who have interest in politics also have the highest levels of participation in electoral activities. This is supported by findings earlier reported that women with political interest are more likely to be politically active (Chhibber 2002).

Apart from 'Interest in politics' being a strong predictor, media exposure is the second best predictor of political participation of women in elections ($b = .051$, $\text{Sig.} = .000$). This indicates that women with high levels of exposure to media have high participation in the political process. Interestingly, the locality where women reside has a negative relation with political participation among women ($b = -.084$). That is, women living in urban areas were found to be participating less in electoral politics as compared with women living in rural

areas. The reasons could be manifold, but low participation in electoral politics is a common phenomenon among urban voters in India and urban women are no exception (Chhibber 2002).

TABLE 8
Result of regression on political participation of women

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Media exposure	.051	.000
Locality	-.084	.000
Occupation	.045	.000
Interest in politics	.412	.000
Influence on voting decisions	-.018	.083
Education	.020	.089
Economic class	.021	.000
R²: .129; Constant: .617		

Source: National Election Study 2004, CSDS Data Unit, Delhi.

The occupation and economic class of women both have a positive relationship with political participation with $b = .045$ and $.021$ respectively. Women who have a life outside the household are more interested in politics and more politically active (Chhibber 2002). This means working women who are more exposed to public life participate more in election campaigns than non-working women/housewives. But in case of economic class, the findings show the women from the poor economic class participate more in electoral politics than women from the rich class. Higher economic class apathy towards political participation reflects that there is no gender divide among the affluent class. In case of educational background and influence on women's voting decisions, our analysis reveals that they have an insignificant relation with political participation, i.e. $.089$ and $.083$ respectively. Thus, we can conclude that apart from women's interest in politics as a strong predictor of their increased participation in electoral process, media exposure is the best predictor of political participation of Indian women. So we can fairly say that women's interest in politics is a key factor that determines their high level of participation in electoral politics, media exposure is an equally strong determinant of gender participation and their degree of participation in formal politics.

IMPACT OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL EXCLUSION ON WOMEN AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

Despite the Constitution's guarantee for equal rights to both men and women to participate in political activities with universal franchise, the

existing societal value system, the private-public divide in terms of domain identification and male preponderance in political institutions restrict women from exercising and enjoying their political rights. These factors also act as deterrents and hindrances in the larger issue of women's advancement as a whole. The lack of 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 elected men and women as people's representatives are quite different and their priority of public works undertaken is also not similar. While women representatives addressed issues of long-term benefits such as education, health, violence against women and basic amenities that affect community, men concentrated on issues that needed immediate attention such as roads, community and commercial centres, tanks, bridges, etc. (Interim Narrative Report 2002-03). Thus, men's agenda of public work tends to neglect women's issues and is detrimental towards women's advancement and progress in the larger interest of the society.

It may be argued that if there were a significant number of women representatives in the parliament they could have played a crucial and concerted role in getting the Bill to introduce 33 per cent reservation for women in state legislature and parliament passed and enacted cutting across party lines and divide. On one hand, the absence of critical mass of such women representatives reduces their bargaining and negotiating power during the allotment of key cabinet berths such as finance, home, defence, health, etc., which are generally allotted to men and considered heavyweight ministries. On the other, women are mostly allotted ministries during cabinet formation which are not only termed as 'feminine' ministries like women and children, information and culture, social welfare, etc., but which are perceived as relatively less important with fewer resources and reach among the people. To this extent, women seem to have failed in breaking the glass ceiling and relegated to the fringes in power sharing at the top level, which in turn has an adverse impact on their overall political status in the country.

A low proportion of women in the inner party structure 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 the demands and aspirations of their constituencies, which inevitably results in women being perceived as weak representatives - generally unaccepted as political leaders by people in their constituency. At times being in insignificant numbers may

put them in a vulnerable position resulting in seeking alliances along caste, religion and regional identities rather than along common gendered interests (Baseline Report 1998). Thus, women in public life as people's representatives often become co-opted in the men-centric structure of development agendas. At the grass root levels of Panchayati Raj Institutions, there have been strong roadblocks to women's entry into politics and a backlash of violence to keep them away from politics (Baseline Report 1998).

The absence of affirmative action for 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in state legislatures and parliament is having a negative impact on women's share in the institutions of representations. However, having said that it must be noted that treating women as a blanket category for the benefits of reservation would further complicate the issue of women's representation because such benefits would largely be appropriated by those women who belong to the upper stratum of society or by those having a political background. Hence, women from the lower economic strata, backward castes and from marginalised groups would get further excluded from contesting elections and sharing political power.

Thus, it is likely that the disadvantaged sections among the women who have already been denied their political rights to participate in elections as candidates arising out of their situational deficiencies and lack of political connections are further relegated to the background. And yet, the absence of proportionate and qualitative representation of women in top legislative and decision-making bodies is leading to a lopsided working of democracy in the country. Thus, for democracy to become successful at the ground level, men and women should get a free and proportionate chance to enjoy and exercise their political rights and participation. The inclusion of women in the political structure and their proportionate participation will not only correct the existing gender gaps but also bring gender issues to the forefront leading to women's empowerment and advancement in the society.

CONCLUSION AND WAY AHEAD

A balance sheet of gender participation in formal politics reveals that there has been a marked increase in voting turnout and election campaigning among women. While there have been significant gains among women in these areas of political participation, they continue to be excluded from legislative bodies at national and state level and deprived from key decision-making positions in government and political parties. The under-

representation of women in Lok Sabha and state assemblies and from crucial decision-making positions like important cabinet berths are clear pointers of their systematic exclusion from power sharing on gender basis. Though women head a significant number of national and state level political parties as party leaders, their representation within the rank and file of prominent political parties are not in significant numbers. Women who have made their presence felt in inner party structures are also relegated to second rung leadership and have failed to break the 'glass ceiling'. They rarely play any role in formulating policies and strategies in political parties and are assigned the job of keeping an eye on 'women's issues' that could bring electoral benefits and dividends for the party in future hustings.

However, the silver lining in dark clouds over women's participation in politics is a participatory upsurge witnessed among women as voters in the 1990s. Women's participation as voters has steadily increased in the few decades from 46.6 per cent in 1962 to around 53.5 per cent in 2004. The difference in voter turnout among men and women that was as high as 15.4 per cent in General Elections held in 1952 has narrowed down to 8.4 per cent in 2004. The difference in voting based on gender remains significant, but it clearly points out that the participation of women as voters is on the upswing at the national level as more and more women have started exercising their electoral rights. Similarly, women's participation in formal politics has also increased in campaign activities during the election. A comparative analysis of the last two general elections revealed that low participation of women in election campaigning which was as high as 91 per cent during General Elections 1999 dropped by 11 percentage points to 80 per cent in General Elections held in the year 2004. Thus, political participation of women in electoral politics and activities connected with it is witnessing a definite upswing as is quite evident from their increased participatory trends.

The levels of political participation among women are governed by an array of factors as revealed by the NES 2004 such as exposure to media, interest in politics, voting discretion and demographics like educational attainments, economic class and employment status. A regression analysis of key determinants of women's participation revealed that, 'interest in politics' is one of the best predictors of their levels of participation. This finding is substantiated by earlier researches which have shown that women with interest in politics are likely to be politically more active than those who have no interest in politics. Among the other factors that determine

the intensity of women's political participation, 'media exposure' is a strong determinant of political participation of women in India as women with high exposure to media have higher participation rates in electoral politics. Thus, women's interest in politics and media exposure – proxy for awareness creation - are the key determinants of gender participation and their degree of participation in formal politics.

Women's movement and gender politics in the country is currently divided over the question of affirmative action for women in parliament and state legislatures which centres around two main issues: first, the issue of overlapping quotas for women in general and those for women of the lower castes and second, the issue of elitism. These are difficult issues to resolve. However, given the dismal representation of women as a whole in the political arena, it may be argued that affirmative action for women in legislative bodies is the need of the hour, which would go a long way in bridging the existing gap in the democratic political set-up and make it gender inclusive.

The key areas that need to be addressed for improving political participation of women and inclusion in the political process apart from affirmative action are more representation of women in political parties, including them in the decision-making bodies of political parties and providing them key cabinet berths in government at the centre and state level. Women should be promoted and encouraged by concerted effort of government in partnership with civil society for enhanced and quality participation in formal politics. An increased political participation by women in all spheres of political life will not only ensure political parity and equality with men, but would also serve the larger issues concerning women, i.e. upliftment and empowerment of Indian women. □

Notes

- 1 Political Participation Index was created from women who participated in the following activities in NES 2004 data set: women, who attended election meetings, participated in election rallies and meetings, door-to-door canvassing, donations to parties and distributing party agenda leaflets. The participation level of women in election campaigns were indexed into three categories: Low, women who participated in any one activity; Medium, women who participated in 2 or 3 activities; and High, women who participated in 3 or more activities.
- 2 Media Exposure Index was created from women's exposure to the following media from NES 2004 data sets: newspaper reading habits, listening to news on radio and watching news on television. Women's exposure to media were indexed into three categories: Low, women who were sometimes exposed to any one medium and never in rest; Medium, women who were sometimes exposed to 2 or 3 medium; and High, women who were mostly exposed to 3 or more mediums.

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