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### WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS: A WAY FORWARD TO EMPOWERMENT

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#### ABSTRACT

Women constitute nearly half of the world's population and represent a vital human resource whose empowerment is central to achieving inclusive development and social justice. Among the various dimensions of empowerment, political empowerment occupies a pivotal position as it determines women's access to decision-making, leadership, and the formulation of policies that affect their lives. This paper critically examines the contours of women's political empowerment in India by tracing its historical evolution from the reformist movements of the colonial era to post-independence constitutional guarantees and contemporary governance structures. It analyzes women's participation in formal politics and local self-governance through empirical evidence and policy reviews, assessing whether enhanced representation has led to substantive empowerment or remains primarily symbolic. Drawing on feminist theoretical frameworks and global gender indices, the study highlights the persistent gap between numerical participation and real political agency. The findings reveal that while constitutional amendments such as the 73rd and 74th have significantly increased women's presence in local governance, patriarchal structures, socio-cultural constraints, and institutional barriers continue to impede their effective participation. The paper concludes that political empowerment must transcend mere representation to become a transformative process that redefines power relations, strengthens democracy, and ensures gender-equitable governance..

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### **Introduction and statement of the problem**

While the origin of the concept of empowerment goes back to the civil rights movement in the USA in the early 1960s, empowerment became popular in the development field in 1980s. The 1990s however, brought international attention to the issues of sexual and reproductive rights, violence against women, and gender inequality. At the Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1993 and the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 Governments committed themselves to the empowerment of women which was operationalized and formulated into a clear action plan at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 where Governments again committed themselves to the “empowerment and advancement of women, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, thus contributing to the moral, ethical, spiritual and intellectual needs of women and men, individually or in community with others and thereby guaranteeing them the possibility of realizing their full potential in society and shaping their lives in accordance with their own aspirations.”<sup>1</sup>As a concept women empowerment was introduced at the International Women Conference in 1985 at Nairobi, which described it as redistribution of social power and control of resources in favor of women.

The empowerment of women is located within the discourse and agenda of gender equality and is increasingly being taken in the agendas of international development organizations, perhaps more as a means to achieve gender equality than as an end in itself. Women empowerment is considered as a means of developing women as more aware individuals, who are politically active, economically productive and independent and are able to make intelligent decisions in matters that affect them. Empowerment touches women's sense of self-worth and social identity; their willingness and ability to question their subordinate status and identity; their capacity to exercise strategic control over their own lives and to re-negotiate their relationships with others who matter to them; and their ability to participate on equal terms with men in re-shaping the societies in which they live in ways that contribute to a more just and democratic distribution of power and possibilities. Women empowerment is seen as the process and the result of the process of challenging the ideology of male domination and women's subordinations; and enabling women to gain equal access to and control over the material, human and intellectual resources<sup>4</sup>. The process of empowerment has five dimensions: cognitive, psychological, economic, political and physical. It is a socio-political concept that goes beyond ‘formal political participation’ and ‘consciousness raising’. The ‘political’ element entails that women have the capability to analyze, organize and mobilize for social change. Thus, the necessity of women's participation in political leadership is not only about achieving gender equality but also about realizing the broader goals of peace, security and sustainable development.

The remainder of this paper conceptualizes political empowerment of women, highlights the relevance and need for empowering women politically, describes the state of the political empowerment of women in India and abroad, identifies the hindrances in the way of women's political empowerment, and suggests workable measures for empowering women politically.

## Review of Literature

The discourse on women's political participation and empowerment has been shaped by a broad range of feminist, developmental, and governance perspectives. Early feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir (1949) in *The Second Sex* articulated how women's exclusion from the public and political domains is rooted in patriarchal social structures that assign them secondary roles. Later, Kate Millett (1970) in *Sexual Politics* further highlighted the political nature of gender relations and the systemic subordination of women within both private and public spheres. These foundational works positioned women's political exclusion as a structural issue rather than an individual deficit.

From a development studies perspective, [Naila Kabeer \(1994, 2008\)](#) conceptualized empowerment as a process of gaining the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where such ability was previously denied. Her work underscored that political participation is not only a measure of empowerment but also a means of challenging existing power hierarchies. Similarly, Moser (1993) in *Gender Planning and Development* argued that women's inclusion in political decision-making is essential for achieving equitable development outcomes.

International institutions have reinforced these scholarly positions through empirical data. The World Bank (2011) in its *World Development Report on Gender Equality and Development* and the UNDP (2020) *Human Development Report* both demonstrate a positive correlation between women's political participation and improved governance, transparency, and development outcomes. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021) and World Economic Forum (2021) further reveal that despite global progress, gender gaps in political representation remain among the widest in public life, with India ranked low on the political empowerment index.

Empirical research in the Indian context presents a complex picture. Desai and Thakkar (2007) in *Women and Political Participation in India* note that while constitutional guarantees and legislative measures have enabled women's entry into politics, patriarchal structures within political parties continue to restrict their agency. Vibhuti Patel (2010) emphasized that political decentralization, through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, has transformed local governance into a key site for women's empowerment by providing them direct access to decision-making spaces. However, Tadros (2010) cautions that quotas alone do not guarantee empowerment unless accompanied by structural and cultural shifts in political institutions.

Studies evaluating the impact of women's representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions have yielded important insights. Beaman et al. (2012), through a randomized field experiment in West Bengal, demonstrated that exposure to women leaders increased aspirations and educational attainment among girls, indicating the broader social effects of women's political visibility. Similarly, research by the Accountability Initiative (2008) showed that Panchayats led by women prioritized community welfare issues such as health, water, and sanitation more effectively than

those led by men. Yet, as Roshan Ara (2013) and Benería (2007) argue, many elected women representatives still operate under male supervision, and proxy leadership remains a persistent concern.

Feminist governance theorists such as Anne Phillips (1995) in *The Politics of Presence* and Martha Nussbaum (2000) in *Women and Human Development* stress that representation must go beyond mere presence to ensure that women can influence policy outcomes and reshape political discourse. Similarly, Drude Dahlerup (2006), in her comparative study on gender quotas, posits that critical mass—commonly 30% representation—is essential for women to effect real institutional change. In the South Asian context, Ritu Dewan (2019) and Amrita Basu (2016) have shown that cultural expectations, violence in politics, and intra-party hierarchies still act as deterrents to women's effective political participation.

Collectively, the literature underscores a paradox: while institutional reforms have improved women's descriptive representation, substantive representation—the ability to influence political agendas and policy outcomes—remains limited. The scholarship converges on the view that women's political empowerment in India requires not only affirmative action but also deeper structural transformation, gender sensitization within political institutions, and the creation of enabling environments that support women as autonomous political actors.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design to examine the political empowerment of women in India, focusing on the extent, nature, and impact of their participation in formal and grassroots governance structures. The methodology integrates both secondary data analysis and theoretical interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of women's political inclusion within India's democratic framework.

### **Conceptualizing Political Empowerment of Women**

World over, there is a paradigm shift in the roles women play in all kinds of organizations, from the domestic activists to the feminists and even they are actively involved in the armed movements, implying thereby a serious makeover in the political culture and gender relationships. Even those women who do not actively participate in politics and are traditionally regarded as passive women share the awareness of problems regarding the need to change, to democratize and to transform gender relations. While in the last century women heads of the state could be counted in Asia as compared to Europe and the struggle for women suffrage in India was physically less violent, this is not reflective of greater acceptance of women in decision-making in public spaces. World over the patriarchal structure of the society and male psyche has not allowed women to become the active participants in public life. History is witness to the fact that women have remained only a ruled class and not the ruling one. Women in many countries still lack independent rights to own

land, manage property, conduct business, or even travel without their husband's consent. From the patriarchal point of view, women are the 'subject class' and men are the 'ruling class' and enjoying monopoly over political power since long. The corridors of power have always been the domain of men as they have shaped the destiny of female folk according to their likes and dislikes. Many rulers even kept women in subjugation so that they do not raise their voice and men do not lose their authority and dominance over women.

Women's political participation is a very vital component and the main source of overall empowerment of women because political empowerment infuses blood into other components of empowerment and makes them functional. Hence, it can be stated that 'politics' is power and power lies with 'politics' and impacts the economy and the society. Political participation is a very important indicator of women's status in the society because it reflects women's access to the corridors of power at the apex level that determines the decisions regarding one's life in society and economy. Female Governance is the key for uplifting the down trodden and under privileged class of the society. Women's participation in politics means 'a participative democracy' in real sense because women consist of almost half of the world's population. Political empowerment of women refers to their equitable representation in decision-making structures and their voice in the formulation of policies affecting their societies. While in a narrow sense it includes activities related to electoral politics like voting, campaigning, holding party offices and contesting election, in a broader sense it encompasses all voluntary actions intended to influence the making of public policies, the administration of public affairs and the choice of political leaders at all levels of governance. These are all related to the enhancement of women's capabilities and decisions they take individually or collectively for themselves. Empowerment as a political process requires not only a change in power relations at the family and community levels, but also at societal level in terms of the recognition of the needs and rights of women on an equal footing to men. It also requires a change in gender equality policies of the state, posing a structural challenge to the existing power relations<sup>5</sup>.

As one of the most visible active steps to increase women's political participation after the right to vote, have been the quotas for women introduced in parliaments and local governments around the world. Several questions are raised on the motivations behind increasing women's political participation which would inherently feed back into the effectiveness and quality of their participation, for example whether they are given a platform and can take the opportunity to actively contribute and can make a difference to women's rights and gender equality<sup>6</sup>. It is essential to understand whether quotas can and should be used as proxies for understanding government's commitments to gender equality. The issue of family support for women's participation in politics also becomes essential.

### **Why Political Empowerment of Women Matters?**

Women's participation contributes to more inclusive, balanced and representative societies provided women have a voice at all levels of society and are able to effectively participate in decisions that affect their lives. In many countries women have little say over decisions that affect them, be it in their households, communities and societies as a whole. Century's long suffocation in male dominated society has put women in a marginalized and backward lot as their voice has remained unheard and they have been made to listen and follow the dictates of the rulers from their opposite gender. Women participate less in formal politics than men and are underrepresented at most levels of decision-making; particularly in the upper echelons of government. Women living in poverty and those who face additional discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, sexuality, disability, caste, or age amongst others, have even less say or control over decisions that affect them and over resources at all levels.

There is evidence that women's increased political participation in real sense has yielded positive results. Women have critical information about community resources, are adept at managing funds, result in more inclusive governance and learn quickly about how to lead effective community centered development. The success of women's participation in governance is attributed to women representatives' exemplifying new possibilities for change and women leaders' taking up issues having a positive impact on the community as a whole. A woman possesses an excellent capacity of a leader. She is the embodiment of peace, love and affection because of her motherly instincts. Today we have a good number of well educated and professionally trained women leaders who can take the responsibility, bring about the positive change and govern successfully and efficiently. The studies conducted on many famous national as well as international organizations like Yahoo, Pepsi etc, headed by women reveal the growth and prosperity of these organizations. Women's participation at all levels of society is essential for creating fair and inclusive societies. Until women and girls are liberated from poverty and injustice, all the goals – peace, security, sustainable development are in jeopardy<sup>7</sup>. Hillary Clinton one said: "...if we believe that human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights, then we cannot accept the ongoing marginalization of half the world's population; morally, politically, socially or economically<sup>8</sup>. Women play an important role in determining the destiny of a nation. Noble Laureate and welfare economist, Prof. Amritya Sen, feels that, "the parameter of the success of development in any society could be measured with the fact that it has provided due space for gender empowerment". By keeping womenfolk away from the national mainstreaming, our policies and programmes related to development will lead to waste of our resources and efforts. When more women are elected to public office, policy-making increasingly reflects the priorities of families, women, and excluded groups. Their participation can lessen corruption and provide for a different mix of policies and public good. Research reveals a strong correlation between the presence of women in representative bodies and the gender sensitivity of the resulting legislation. The absence of women from structures of governance inevitably means that national, regional and local priorities are typically defined without meaningful input from women, whose life experience gives them a different awareness of the community's needs, concerns and interests from that of men. Strong

women's movements are associated with more comprehensive policies on violence against women. Lesser participation of women often means crimes against women go unaddressed and peace agreements do not ultimately reflect popular needs. Evidence has shown that women's political participation has positive impacts on child outcomes, the quality of governance and that generally women invest more in development priorities of women<sup>9</sup>. Women's participation in leadership positions exerts role model effects on younger generations that change their aspirations and thus have in turn the power to (slowly) change gender roles over time<sup>10</sup>. Integrating women into governance is not only a matter of achieving political justice but also of strengthening societal foundations.

### **The State of Political Participation of Women**

The journey of women towards liberation and empowerment truly began during the present century only. Women got the right to vote in 1920 in US and in 1944 in France; and it was only in 1971 that women in an advanced country like Switzerland got the right to vote and stood for election. Even in developed Countries like UK, women have won this suffrage as late as 1948. Women in political offices constitute 33.1% in the USA, only 6.9% in the UK, 10.8% in France, 7.2% in Singapore and India with 5.8% compares favorably with the advanced countries<sup>11</sup>. History reminds us about the transformational politicians and one amongst them was England's female Prime Minister Mrs. Margaret Thatcher who demolished the two conservative pillars of British society and opened the way for a politically powerful British middle class and thus succeeded in creating a modern Britain. Ellen Johnson, the African iron lady, is the first elected female president who got voted to power to put an end to Liberia's history of corrupt rule. She marked a new beginning for her country and for African women.

Within a year of its being founded, United Nations in 1945 took the landmark step of advocating that women be given full political freedom worldwide. The UN has since then been instrumental in a number of foregrounding women's issues. In 1946, it set up a commission known as 'Commission on Status of Women' (CSW) to assess the status of women throughout the world. The creation of this commission was the first step towards voicing women's question at a global level and examining the development process being followed. The commission has played a key role in collecting data and documenting the situation of women across the world. It helped in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Later the General Assembly requested the Commission to start working on this draft of a convention for eliminating all forms of discrimination against women. These joint efforts succeeded in framing a convention known as CEDAW convention for eliminating all forms of discrimination against women in 1979 which helped secure a legal foundation for women's political equality. Women have after a long struggle achieved their right to vote that was an achievement in itself.

United Nations had set a target of 30% parliamentary seats for women to be achieved by 1995. But till date the global average is only half of it and India is far behind. The gender gaps remain the widest in politics with only 22% closed to date, having further widened since the 2020 by 2.4

percentage points. Across the 156 countries covered by the index, women represent only 26.1% of some 35,500 parliament seats and just 22.6% of over 3400 Ministers worldwide<sup>12</sup>. In 81 countries, there has never been a woman head of state till date including countries considered relatively progressive with respect to gender parity such as Sweden, Spain, the Netherlands and the United States. At the current rate of progress, it will take 145.5 years to attain gender parity in politics in the world. Widening gender gaps in political participation have been driven by negative trends in some large countries which have counterbalanced progress in another 98 smaller countries. Among the countries where the share of women ministers declined the most are India (from 23.1% to 9.1%), Indonesia (from 23.5% to 17.1%), Colombia (from 52.9% to 38.8%) and Poland (from 27.3% to 4.8%). Countries where the share of women ministers increased the most by January 2021 from January 2019 include Lithuania (from 0 to 42.9%), Belgium (from 35% to 57.1%), the United States (from 21.7% to 46.2%), Serbia (from 19% to 43.5%), Mozambique (from 28.6% to 45.5%) and Lebanon (from 3.4% to 31.6%)<sup>13</sup>. Women in these countries clearly have access to a wider spectrum of educational, political and work opportunities and enjoy a higher standard of living than women in other parts of the world. Most of European nations rank low overall, a clear reflection of the shortcomings of these so-called “advanced” nations in implementing gender equality.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union reports a world average of only 15.6% in combined houses of parliament, ranging from 6.8% in the Arab States to 18.6% in the Americas, and 39.7% in the Nordic states.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, while high income countries, such as those in the OECD, have made great progress over the past half century in removing some fundamental gender biases, they continue to display significant disparities in the opportunities presented to men and women in the political realm. While women are poorly represented in the lower levels of government, they are rarer still in the upper echelons of decision-making. As per Asian Development Bank (2015) report the share of seats held by women increased from 14.6% in 1990 to 19.3% in 2013 in developing countries. Women's political participation has been highest in East Asia with the parliamentary seats held by women showing an upward trend from 19.9 in 200 to 22.8 in 2013. Nearly two out of every five parliamentarians (38.5%) in Timor-Leste are women. In 13 other economies of the Asia and Pacific region, the percentage of parliamentary seats held by women was in the range of 20% to 31% and was below 10% in 16 other developing Asian economies<sup>15</sup>.

While there has been considerable progress in reducing gender gaps in the political field, gender disparities persist in many countries. Women have been involved in political setup of many nations through right to vote and have been allowed to choose their representatives, but are being counted as voters only and not leaders and contestants, yet world over they form a major section of the disadvantaged group of the society. The most important challenges to women's political empowerment continue to be neoliberal policies in a globalized economy that have shifted the role of the state away from social policies of redistribution and justice and, most importantly, have eroded the value of collective approaches for social well-being<sup>16</sup>. This has severely curtailed the

state's funding and implementation of gender equality commitments. Patriarchal structures and values that shape both the "public" world of work and politics as well as the "private" world of intimate relationships, families, households, and communities are also deeply entrenched and resistant to change.

### **Current status of women in Politics in India**

The status of Indian women has historically been influenced by their past. The women in the Vedic age got most honored positions in the society<sup>17</sup> as they had the right to education and were free to remain unmarried and devote their whole life to the pursuit of knowledge and self realization. The urge for equality on the part of Indian women started getting momentum during the colonial times. Noted social reformers and national leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Annie Besant, Sorojini Naidu and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar made selfless efforts to create awareness among women about their status and were quite successful in removing various social evils such as sati, child marriage, and polygamy. The reformers were successful in creating a base for development of women and their strive for equality. Consequently, women became more liberal and aware of various ways of life.

In India, feminist movement, though started late, showed a positive sign in enhancing the provisions to make women analyze their status and space in the post independent era. During the independence movement, women were visible and active as nationalists. Gandhi ji, in particular, was instrumental in creating space for women through his non-violence (some would argue feminized) mode of protest. Gandhi's legendary salt march initially excluded women, but due to demands from women nationalists, he later realized the power of women organizers at the local level. The nationalist women's movement in India was confronted by the rebuilding of a patriarchal nationalist state. The Non-co-operation Movement of 1920, the Satyagraha Movement of 1930, the Movement of 1942, all inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, helped women to establish their position of equality with men in the social and political spheres. In fact these movements have emancipated women by enabling them to participate in political activities. Women's movements have been constantly demanding decentralization in the process of Governance with the involvement of women. Many other social and communist movements along with political ones have advocated for equal rights of women. It was for the first time that a woman 'Annie Besant' became the first female Governor of united provinces and set a trend for other women to lead and govern. In 1917 Annie Basant became the first female president of Indian National Congress and Sarojni Naidu the first female governor of united provinces. While the period between the early 1940's and late 1970's saw an emergence of the Indian women's movement, it was not until the 1980s that the women's movement gained real momentum. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women (Article 14, 15, 16), but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women. Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. Key among them is the ratification of the

Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993, the Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration as well as the Platform for Action (1995) and the Outcome Document adopted by the UNGA Session on Gender Equality and Development & Peace for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In India women got voting right much before their counterparts in USA and some other European countries. Inclusion of women in the political sphere is thus seen as a powerful instrument for much-needed social change. In 1993, India enacted constitutional reforms (the 73rd and 74th Amendments) making Local Self-Governing Institutions (LSGIs) mandatory, stipulating 33% of seats in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI) to be reserved for women. Indian states such as Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Rajasthan, Tripura, and Uttarakhand have increased reservations for women from 33 to 50%. India is one of the few countries in the world credited to have a woman President, a woman Prime Minister, a woman Speaker and a woman leader of opposition, who in all their capacities have proved their mettle. Today, Indian women are not only represented in almost every field of national activity, but they are also making themselves felt in international affairs, occupying distinguished positions in the Government, as Ministers, Governors of States and Ambassadors. But political participation of women in Legislative Assemblies and Parliament is still quite low in India. As per the Election Commission of India the first post-independence Lok Sabha had just 4.41% women and that in Rajya Sabha 7.31 only. The percentage of women members to the total members in Lok Sabha has varied from 3.49 in 1977 to 11.20 in 2014. While in Rajya Sabha it has varied from 6.12 in 1998 to 15.51 in 1991<sup>18</sup>. While the data reflects a very poor participation of women in political field in the country so far, the increasing trend in the number of women legislatures, ministers and administrators at the state and central levels enhances the expectations of India's female population to break the glass ceiling in many other bastions so far dominated by men.

The World Economic Forum (2021) ranked India high in political empowerment index for women, thanks to the record number of lady parliamentarians thrown up by the last general election and sizeable representation in village councils. India has closed 62.5% of its gender gap by 2021, ranking the country 140th globally, compared to being ranked 98 out of the 115 countries on the Gender Gap Index in 2006. India ranked 25<sup>th</sup> in the world on political empowerment index in 2008 and 51<sup>st</sup> in 2021 which reflects a low level of women's political empowerment in the world. India has not recorded any significant improvement in the ranks of Political Empowerment sub index of women in ministerial positions (132), women in parliament (128) and years with female head of state (07) out of 156 countries<sup>19</sup>. The Government, through notable constitutional reforms like the 73rd and 74th amendments and the continued administrative decentralization through programs like NRHM, has increased the political participation of women. Political interventions by women of India today range from movement for peace and good governance to protest against dowry, rape, domestic violence, food adulteration, price rise etc<sup>20</sup>. In the last two decades since the reservation for women in elected Panchayats was passed, many studies have been conducted to look at the impact of this policy. A survey conducted in 2008 yielded that women made up close

to 50% of all the village councils across the India<sup>21</sup>. The number of women representatives has certainly increased at the grassroots level; however, questions still remain regarding their decision-making power within the councils. A study in West Bengal and Rajasthan found that where women Panchayat members were active, there were more robust programs on water, irrigation, and infrastructure. In Panchayats where women were present policies were more beneficial to the community than in Panchayats where women were absent. A study by the Accountability Initiative also states that in Panchayats with female presidents, the participation of women in the larger council rose close to 3% in one year.<sup>22</sup> Despite so many efforts undertaken by government and NGOs, the picture at present appears to be dismal. However, the key questions with regard to women's reservation in politics is whether this actually contributes to women's real political participation. However, many analysts complain that men continue to act as key decision-makers, while women play a more passive role. Moreover, the work of female politicians is typically dismissed, underrated or unrecognized by their male counterparts.

### **Jammu and Kashmir Perspective**

In Jammu and Kashmir women have always enjoyed a great degree of respect and freedom and the State has always displayed a unique gender balance. While politics, power and statecraft have been the exclusive domain of men, women have enjoyed a great degree of respect and freedom. In fact, Kashmir is credited with having one of the first queens in the prehistoric era. Yasuvati's reign, stretching over fifteen years, is widely hailed as an era of peace, progress and prosperity. Since then a chain of strong queens ruled Kashmir with wisdom, determination, and even ruthlessness. These exceptional women played significant roles in the evolution of Kashmir. In fact they all displayed very special vitality, courage and independence of conviction<sup>23</sup>. The position of women in Kashmir was further elevated by Islam, as it acted as an emancipator of the fair sex in other parts of the world. But the dawn of Afghan rule in Kashmir signaled an unending period of gloom, aversion, and degeneration. Under the rule of Sikhs and Dogras whole of Kashmir suffered a lot and the Kashmiri women had to share the maximum burden of these sufferings. Later, women participated on a large scale in the fight against feudalism and imperialist control in Kashmir during the nationalist struggle. The women fought shoulder to shoulder with their counterparts against the Dogra rule. The protesting women were abused, molested, and then killed in large numbers. With its multifaceted and radical activities, Women's Self Defence Corps (WSDC) was harbinger of social change. Kashmiri women, many of them great scholars and administrators, came forward and openly joined the fight against the Dogra rule in 1931 and the Quit Kashmir Movement in 1846<sup>24</sup>. The brave women like Begum Akbar Jehan, Zainab Begum and Ms. Mehmooda Ali Shah served as inspiration for Kashmir's women, urging them to carry forward the struggle for freedom and justice and above all for the spirit of Kashmiriyat rooted in the traditions of peers and rishis of their unique land. The Women Charter of the New Kashmir Manifesto embodied the revolutionary and emancipatory vision of the movement aimed at helping women in attainment of their just, equal and rightful place in the society. It granted women the right to vote and contest elections. It provided for complete equality

of women with men, in all fields of life, including political, economic and social and educational through measures of affirmative action and equal pay for equal work, anti-natal and maternity facilities, legal policies of rights and status, abolition of dowry and cultural development of women.

In spite of a glorious past, women have, however, not figured very prominently in the formal competitive politics in the J&K. Female participation in political and gainful employment has not only been numerically insignificant but restricted to known political families only. In fact, a few women who rose to the stature in the post-independence period had strong political family backgrounds and connection. Moreover, women's agenda and gender-oriented politics could never get encouraged mostly due to the lack of autonomous political space, an aspect intricately linked to the patriarchal nature of Kashmir society. Their political activism and assertion are rooted in their cultural and designated roles. Despite a liberal ethos and high status of women in Jammu and Kashmir, there has been a lack of women's organizations working for gender justice and women's empowerment. Since the early decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century women in Jammu and Kashmir have undergone a significant transformation and various initiatives aimed at women empowerment and development have helped in improving the status of women in various spheres to a great extent, but the imbalance still exists which needs to be addressed over the years. At the endogenous level, emerging political consciousness, expanding modern education, spreading of cultural awareness, deteriorating economic conditions and large-scale social awakening created a situation in which women felt concerned about their position, especially their role and status in and out of the family. At the exogenous level there was a strong impact of the outside/alien cultures and other political, economic and social developments in the Indian subcontinent on the situation in J & K. After 1947, all successive governments in J&K attempted to improve the conditions of women by safeguarding their political, economic and social rights which had a qualitative impact on the role and political status of women in the State<sup>25</sup>.

### **What Ails Women Participation in Politics?**

Female participation in politics, on the whole, has not only been numerically insignificant but restricted to known political families only. Moreover, women's agenda and gender-oriented politics could never get encouraged due to several limitations, the most obvious being the lack of autonomous political space. While a number of other factors continue to hinder the parliamentary representation of women, the type of electoral system present in a country, the role and discipline of the political parties, the lack of previous political experiences of women, lack of funding, the widespread perception that women are not competent leaders, is probably the strongest barrier to the participation of women in politics. The leadership role is typically considered a male role and the women leaders are evaluated more negatively than male leaders<sup>26</sup>. There exists a significant cultural barrier in recognizing women as competent policy makers. In some cases, legislation itself discriminates against them, for instance when women and girls cannot own property or inherit capital. Evidence provides support for the idea of "reservations" or quotas for women in

policymaking positions. To achieve balanced gender representation rapidly, quick affirmative action will be needed. Even where quotas might facilitate women's participation, social norms prevent them from accessing their rights and lock them into unequal power relationships with little voice, including their own families. The Panchayat raj institutions, which hold the key to the election of three million people's representatives every five years of which one million are women representatives, are expected to act as important agents for local governance. But most of these women Panchayat members are illiterate and ignorant and not aware of their role and responsibility. They are not in a position to challenge patriarchy and dominance. The major decisions of their localities are taken by the male members of their families. During a study on the functioning of Panchayat Raj functioning in J&K, participants expressed their helplessness, powerlessness and dissatisfaction in spite of their political backing<sup>27</sup>. They complained about the lack of financial support, lack of funds for the developmental purposes, risk to life due to non availability of security cover, dual household and family responsibilities. There is a serious concern about the way women are handled at various levels and the way doubts are being raised about their competence.

Patriarchy still rules the roost from ticket distribution to mandates and assigning leadership roles to women. Although representation of women and members of the lower castes in Indian politics is rapidly changing, complexities of caste politics continue to govern representation. Most of the local governments remain largely patriarchal and caste-based institutions, hindering inclusive governance. Further, social mobility remains a privilege of members of higher classes and caste. Proxy politics, power brokering and gender discrimination continue, and many women representatives have had to face extreme violence for challenging existing societal power centers. In spite of the affirmative action in favor of marginalized communities, exclusion of caste, poverty, tribal status, gender and caste sharply demarcate the ones who possess political power from those who do not.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

The analysis of women's participation in Indian politics reveals a persistent tension between formal inclusion and substantive empowerment. While constitutional and policy reforms—most notably the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments—have significantly expanded women's representation in governance, this quantitative progress has not fully translated into qualitative transformation. Women remain underrepresented in legislative and executive decision-making, and their participation often remains constrained by structural patriarchy, socio-cultural norms, and institutionalized gender biases.

The central research question—to what extent has women's political participation in India led to real empowerment rather than symbolic representation—finds a nuanced answer in this study. The evidence suggests that political empowerment in India has been largely procedural rather than transformative. Women's visibility in politics has increased, but their agency, autonomy, and

influence on policy outcomes remain limited. Local governance reforms have created entry points for women, yet patriarchal control, limited capacity-building, and resource constraints prevent these gains from maturing into sustained empowerment.

To move from symbolic to substantive empowerment, the following policy and institutional interventions are essential:

### **1. Institutional Reforms and Capacity Building:**

Establish continuous gender-sensitization and leadership training programs for women representatives at all levels of governance. Institutionalizing mentorship networks and political training schools can help women navigate the complexities of governance and policy-making more effectively.

### **2. Gender-Responsive Political Party Reforms:**

Political parties must democratize candidate selection processes, ensure gender quotas in party leadership structures, and adopt transparent funding mechanisms to support women candidates. This internal reform is crucial for shifting power dynamics from token inclusion to genuine participation.

### **3. Strengthening Legal Frameworks:**

Passage and effective implementation of the Women's Reservation Bill at the national and state legislative levels remain imperative. Legal reforms should be complemented by mechanisms to monitor and evaluate women's actual participation and decision-making authority, not merely their numerical presence.

### **4. Transformative Governance and Gender Mainstreaming:**

Integrating gender perspectives into every stage of policy formulation, budgeting, and program evaluation will ensure that governance processes are responsive to women's needs. Gender-responsive budgeting should become a mandatory element of planning at both central and local levels.

### **5. Cultural and Educational Interventions:**

Structural change requires long-term transformation in social attitudes. Gender equality must be embedded within educational curricula, civic education, and media narratives to

dismantle deep-seated stereotypes about women's leadership capabilities.

## 6. Research and Data Innovation:

Future research should move beyond descriptive accounts of representation to explore qualitative indicators of empowerment—including women's influence on policy outcomes, inter-generational effects, and intersectional barriers based on caste, class, and region. Building comprehensive gender-disaggregated political datasets will strengthen evidence-based policymaking.

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