
ELECTED BUT EXCLUDED: THE PARADOX OF WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS

Swanandi Patil & Madhura Narkar, KES Shri Jayantilal H. Patel Law College

ABSTRACT

India, a country that is known for its rich cultural diversity, a country where various social norms like caste, language, religion co-exist. A country that has a great ancient mythological history where women were worshipped as Goddesses, sadly still the reality of their treatment in places of power in this 21st century reveals nothing but stark contradiction. It is often claimed that the patriarchy is now dead but in reality, it still does exist.

Issues like gender exclusion, societal bias and various barriers hinder women from entering into politics. not just that but even once entered, women still go through the issue of “puppet-leadership” where basically women from political families are used as tokens by the male members of the families for the seats. Women in this country form nearly half the population yet they hold just a 14-15% reservation in parliament. The reality of treatment of women in the spaces of power and authority in India is deeply troubling and this research paper exactly intends to highlight various issues faced by them in Indian politics.

Keywords: Women, Politics, Patriarchy, India.

“She builds the nation with her bare hands and bold heart yet, her voice is just a whisper in the halls of power”

1. INTRODUCTION:

India is often celebrated as the largest democracy in the world, built on ideals of justice, equality, and representation. However, this image stands in sharp contrast to the reality of women's position in Indian politics. Despite constituting nearly half of the population, women remain significantly underrepresented in decision-making spaces. From local governance bodies to Parliament, their participation continues to be limited due to deep-rooted societal biases, gender discrimination, and patriarchal norms.

While India has witnessed strong female leaders from mythological figures like Draupadi to political figures like Indira Gandhi and such examples are often treated as exceptions rather than the norm. This paper examines the structural and social challenges that continue to restrict women's effective participation in politics.

1.1 Patriarchal Indian Society.

In a patriarchal system, the life and identity of a woman are often determined even before her birth. The life and the identity of a woman is decided by the society before she takes birth. India's social framework has confined the identity of women by giving them the secondary status, which limits her from playing a major role in the society. It is essential for a woman to excel in her responsibilities as a loyal wife and a dedicated mother. Unless she is loyal and obedient in the eyes of the males of the society, a woman cannot gain respect. Within the patriarchal framework, women's contributions are perpetually undervalued.

Due to the patriarchal system in India, men have consistently asserted their dominance over women. This system emphasizes male dominance in Indian society and prevents women from making independent decisions. The patriarchy causes women to feel subordinate to men. A woman is often expected to forsake her desires for the family's happiness and to be a devoted wife, a devoted mom and her well-mannered daughter. With all these so called “societal norms” that are expected to follow by the women in Indian society, it is extremely difficult for women in here to come out within the corridors of the patriarchal society.

Patriarchy is one of the strongest challenge that women still tend to face while entering within

authority and to be very specific, this patriarchy does not just come from the male section of society its often women themselves too and the striking example of this Mayawati, a female leader who often spoke about how women in power have tried to sideline her, question her capabilities not on the basis of her merit but rivalry of prejudice. The fact that even the women are brainwashed due to the patriarchal mindset is deeply saddening. It is like women unknowingly themselves being one of the prominent reasons to make things even more difficult for them to enter within the political world.¹

1.2 The Safety Crisis.

Women safety is a major elephant in the room when it comes to challenges within the politics. Women politicians face threat not just to their power but to their personhood. The challenges begin even before women enter politics, as societal norms and patriarchal expectations discourage them from stepping into public life. Those who manage to break the barriers and make their entry possible within this system, often face hostility in form of verbal abuse, character assassination, online harassment, and, in some cases, physical threats. This climate does endanger their personal safety but also makes it difficult for them to play their role as representatives effectively. Women often face sexist remarks and constant questioning based on their morality, appearance and personal lives rather than their capabilities and policies. This behaviour does not just come from the opponent party members but is often observed from the male section of same political parties. Thus, highlighting the misogyny within these political structures. Not just this but online platforms play a major role in hampering a women's safety too. Online trolling, threats of violence and spread of misinformation often lead to discrediting women for their work and mainly assassination of their character. Although several laws exist within the favour of women, their implementation does weaken within political contexts. The saree pulling incident that took place with J. Jayalalitha in 1989 during the ongoing parliament session is a striking example of this. Just like Draupadi in Mahabharata, who was humiliated in a room full of men, Jayalalitha faced disgrace in parliament. Both incidents show how despite being revered in culture and traditions.²

In the country where women are worshipped like Goddesses, the reality of their treatment in

¹ Ritumbara Trivedi & Rekha Tiwari, Patriarchal System and the Condition of Women, 7 *Notions*, no. 4, 1 (2016).

² Akshaya Nath, The 'Torn Sari' That Shaped Amma—What Happened to Jayalalithaa in TN Assembly on 25 March 1989, *ThePrint* (Aug. 19, 2023, 10:35 AM), <https://theprint.in/statedraft/the-torn-sari-that-shaped-amma-what-happened-to-jayalalithaa-in-tn-assembly-on-25-march-1989/1719660/>.

the spaces of power is deeply troubling. Thus, women often face disrespect in the spaces of power. In order to overcome this negative approach towards women, it is essential to create a safer political environment for women. Political parties must take responsibility for making sure that their members follow standards of respectful behaviour. It is just as important to improve legal frameworks and make sure they are properly enforced. Mechanisms for rapidly addressing instances of harassment and violence should be established, and law enforcement authorities should be made aware of the particular challenges that women encounter in politics.

In addition, education and awareness are essential to altering societal norms. It is possible to foster a society that values and appreciates women's contributions in all fields, including politics, by confronting stereotypes and encouraging gender equality from a young age. In addition, media firms have a responsibility to refrain from sensationalism and make certain that their reporting does not support negative preconceptions against female leaders. Ultimately, protecting women in Indian politics is about more than just safeguarding people; it's about improving democracy as a whole. Half of the people cannot be considered represented in a political system that does not offer a secure and inclusive atmosphere. When women can engage freely and safely, they bring diverse viewpoints and experiences that enhance policy and promote fairer governance. Thus, addressing the problem of women's safety in politics is not only a question of fairness but also a crucial necessity for the advancement and integrity of the country.

1.3 Puppet Leadership.

For generations, and if we are being honest, for as long as governance has existed women have been systematically excluded from spaces of political power. Yet, every time one barrier falls, another quietly rises in its place. Women fought for the right to vote and won. They fought for access to education, and prevailed. They fought for entry into political office, and the law ultimately conceded. But just when it appeared that representation had been secured, a quieter, more insidious problem emerged one that nobody had quite anticipated: proxy participation. The seat now belongs to a woman. The power, however, does not.

This phenomenon, colloquially referred to as the "puppet system," is not a term of mockery but rather an uncomfortable mirror held up to a political reality that is both demeaning and deeply structural. The word puppet captures what the data consistently confirms: that in a significant number of cases, elected women in Indian politics particularly at the grassroots level are present

in form but absent in function.

a. The Political Party Problem

Before examining the mechanics of proxy governance, it is worth pausing on how this problem originates not just in villages, but in the very process of candidate selection. As Dr. Santosh K. Tripathi of Amity University, Haryana, observes in his paper *Proxy Participation by Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Critical Study*, political parties, when fielding women candidates for Parliament or state legislatures, rarely evaluate the prospective candidate in isolation. Instead, the contribution and influence of her male family members are factored into the assessment simultaneously.³ This seemingly procedural consideration has a consequential downstream effect: it institutionalises the male relative's involvement from the very moment of candidacy, making his active participation on her behalf appear natural even necessary.

Tripathi further notes that this problem intensifies at the Panchayati Raj level, where reservation for women is not only mandatory but rotational meaning that at some point, virtually every seat falls under women's reservation.⁴ As a result, local male-dominated political networks have developed what he describes as a tacit understanding: to use the formal authority of elected women as a vehicle for their own continued political influence, effectively reducing women to proxy participants in the very institutions designed to include them.⁵

This observation is substantiated by a field study conducted by Ms. Shailiza Mayal, titled *Are Reservations Enough to Empower Women in Local Governance?* examining women's participation in panchayats across Karnal district, Haryana. Of the 95 women sarpanches surveyed, 16 had never personally called a gram sabha a quarterly village meeting that is a core constitutional obligation of the sarpanch. In their place, male family members had convened the meetings. According to gram sachivs (village panchayat secretaries), every single women sarpanch in the sample was assisted by a male family member in conducting panchayat work 76.67% by their husbands, 13.34% by brothers-in-law, and 6.67% by fathers-in-law. Crucially, the study found that the Sarpanch Prati Nidhi or Sarpanch Pati culture existed across all gram

³ Santosh K. Tripathi, *Proxy Participation by Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Critical Study*, IJARIE (2023).

⁴ *Id*

⁵ *Id*

panchayats in the sample not as an exception, but as the norm.⁶

b. From Assistance to Control: How the Gap Widens

It would be too simple to frame this purely as bad faith on the part of male relatives. A more honest accounting requires acknowledging the structural vacuum that makes proxy control almost inevitable. A first-time elected representative with limited administrative experience, no institutional mentorship, and often low literacy will naturally turn to the people closest to her for support. In most cases, that person is a male family member. What begins as assistance, however, can transition into control with remarkable ease.

A 2018 UN Women report identified the key structural barriers that enable this transition: patriarchal norms, lack of governance training, institutional gaps, social pressure, and limited support systems together prevent a significant proportion of elected women from exercising independent decision-making authority.⁷ The law grants them the power. The system denies them the tools to use it.

This is precisely what a field study by Well Labs, conducted in collaboration with IWWAGE across Devadurga and Sirwar talukas of Raichur district, Karnataka, brought into stark relief.⁸ The study found that despite women holding elected positions, decision-making power in practice had quietly migrated out of the panchayat office and into domestic spaces, where husbands, sons, and brothers exercised influence without any constitutional authority to do so. More troublingly, this shift had become normalised. It was not experienced as usurpation. It was experienced as how things work.

One case documented in the study illustrates this with clarity. Lakshamma (name changed), an elected panchayat member from Devadurga, attended meetings regularly and signed all official documents. Yet in deliberations, it was consistently her husband's voice that carried. As she herself put it: "My name is there, my signature is there. But the discussions happen elsewhere." Officials, the study noted, routinely deferred to her husband on the assumption that he understood political matters better an assumption no one had troubled themselves to verify.

⁶ Shailiza Mayal, *Are Reservations Enough to Empower Women in Local Governance?*, as cited in Tripathi, *supra* note 1.

⁷ UN Women, *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Local Governance* (2018).

⁸ WellLabs & IWWAGE, *Women's Leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions: Field Study, Devadurga and Sirwar, Raichur District* (2026), <https://welllabs.org/womens-leadership-in-panchayati-raj-institutions/>.

c. Policy Response and Its Limits

The Indian state has not been entirely silent on this issue. An advisory committee constituted by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj recommended that exemplary penalties be enforced in proven cases of proxy leadership. The committee further proposed a robust reporting mechanism including helplines, women's watchdog committees, and whistleblower rewards for verified complaints.⁹ Ministry Secretary Vivek Bhardwaj, speaking to the Times of India, confirmed that an action plan was being developed for consultation with states, alongside an exclusive capacity-building programme for elected women representatives designed to address leadership challenges from a gendered perspective.

These are meaningful steps. But their adequacy must be measured against what the ground continues to report. Writing in the Arunachal Times on June 8, 2025, a woman panchayat member from Arunachal Pradesh recounted: "They told me I won the election, but I never got to speak a word in the meetings."¹⁰ This single line from a remote corner of Indian democracy, more than three decades after the 73rd Amendment encapsulates the distance between constitutional promise and lived reality.

The tragedy here is not only one of gender injustice. It is a tragedy of lost potential. Research has repeatedly shown that when women are genuinely allowed to lead, they do so with measurable effectiveness. Comprehensive studies in West Bengal and Rajasthan, utilising random assignment of reservations, found that women-led panchayats invested significantly more in public goods aligned with the needs of rural communities drinking water infrastructure, sanitation, and road construction and that the quality of those goods, independently verified, was at least as high as in male-led councils.⁹ Women leaders were also found to be less susceptible to corruption.⁹ And yet, despite these outcomes, both men and women in surveyed communities consistently reported lower satisfaction with female-led governance a finding that researchers have termed the "Satisfaction Paradox."

This paradox is not incidental. It reveals the depth of the structural bias that elected women are up against: voters penalise women for identical performance, attribute failure more harshly to them, and credit their successes less readily.¹¹ The puppet narrative, in this light, is not merely

⁹ Correspondent, *Give 'Exemplary Penalty' to Curb 'Sarpanch Pati' Practices*, Times of India (2025).

¹⁰ *Behind the Curtain of Empowerment: Panchayat Dramas and Proxy Politics*, Arunachal Times, June 8, 2025.

¹¹ Raghavendra Chattopadhyay & Esther Duflo, *Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India*, 72 *Econometrica* 1409 (2004).

a governance failure. It is a socio-cultural rationalisation a way of explaining, and thereby perpetuating, a bias that the data itself refuses to support.

The Well Labs study, to its credit, did not stop at diagnosis. In January and April 2026, it conducted capacity-building and leadership training sessions in selected villages of Raichur district, working through existing institutional structures including NRLM, MGNREGA, Gram Panchayat bodies, and Anganwadi networks. It is precisely this kind of sustained, ground-level intervention paired with the Ministry's proposed accountability mechanisms that offers a credible path forward. Whether the political will exists to walk that path remains the defining question.

1.4 WOMEN RESERVATION BILL (2023)

The 73rd and 74th Amendments passed in 1993, which introduced panchayats and municipalities in the Constitution, reserve one-third of seats for women in these bodies. The Constitution also provides for reservation of seats in Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in proportion to their number in the population. The Constitution does not provide for reservation of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies. Some members of the Constituent Assembly had opposed reserving seats for women in legislatures. 15% of the total members of the 17th Lok Sabha are women while in state legislative assemblies, women on average constitute 9% of the total members 2015¹², the Report on the Status of Women in India noted that the representation of women in state assemblies and Parliament continues to be dismal. The research revealed that political parties have a deficiency of women in decision-making positions within their organizations. The research recommended that all governmental institutions should ensure that half of their roles are filled by women.¹³ The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001) indicated that reservations would be taken into account for higher legislative bodies.¹⁴

Women have been provided with constitutionally protected seats through legislation introduced in 1996, 1998, 1999, and 2008. The initial three Bills lapsed following the dissolution of their

¹² Constituent Assembly Debates 709 (July 18, 1947), <https://loksabha.nic.in/writereaddata/cadebatefiles/vol4.html>.

¹³ Ministry of Women & Child Development, Government of India, Report of the Status of Women in India: Executive Summary (2015), https://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/Executive%20Summary_HLC_0.pdf.

¹⁴ Ministry of Women & Child Development, Government of India, National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001), <https://wcd.nic.in/womendevlopment/national-policy-women-empowerment>.

corresponding Lok Sabhas. The 2008 Bill was submitted to Parliament via Rajya Sabha, where it gained approval, but the dissolution of the 15th Lok Sabha rendered it inactive. The 1996 Bill underwent review by a Joint Committee of Parliament, while the 2008 Bill was evaluated by the Both Committees supported the plan to set aside seats for female representatives.¹⁵ The Committees presented recommendations which included: (i) future assessment of reservation for women from other backward classes, (ii) implementation of 15-year reservation with subsequent evaluation, and (iii) development of methods to allocate seats to women in Rajya Sabha and state legislative councils.¹⁶ The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2023 was introduced in Lok Sabha on September 19, 2023.¹⁷

The Bill proposes to allocate one-third of all Lok Sabha and state legislative assembly seats to female candidates. The proposal for women's reservation in legislatures seeks to fundamentally reshape political representation in India by ensuring that women are no longer confined to the margins of decision-making. At its core, the Bill provides that nearly one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies, and even the Legislative Assembly of Delhi will be reserved for women. Importantly, this quota is not limited to general seats, it also extends to those already reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), ensuring that representation is inclusive across social hierarchies.

However, this change will not come into effect immediately. The implementation is tied to the next census conducted after the law is passed. Once the updated population data is available, a process called delimitation—where constituency boundaries are redrawn, will determine which specific seats are reserved for women. This means that the policy is structured, phased, and dependent on demographic realities rather than being abruptly enforced. The reservation is initially set for a period of 15 years, although Parliament holds the authority to extend it further if deemed necessary.

Another key feature of the Bill is the rotation of reserved seats. Instead of permanently designating certain constituencies for women, the system allows these seats to shift after each delimitation cycle. While this ensures that reservation benefits are distributed more widely across regions, it also raises questions about continuity and long-term political accountability

¹⁵ The Constitution (One Hundred and Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2008.

¹⁶ Rajya Sabha Secretariat, Reservation of Seats for Women in Legislative Bodies: Perspectives (2008), http://164.100.213.102/RSCMSNew/UploadedFiles/ElectronicPublications/reserv_women_pers2008.pdf.

¹⁷ The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2023.

for elected representatives.

The debate around women's reservation is layered and complex, often revolving around three central questions. First, can reservation truly empower women in politics? Supporters argue that representation is not just symbolic, it directly impacts policy outcomes. When women are present in legislative bodies, issues that are often overlooked, such as healthcare, education, and safety, tend to receive greater attention. Evidence from local governance in India supports this view. Studies on Panchayati Raj institutions have shown that women leaders often prioritize community welfare and invest in areas that directly affect everyday lives, particularly those of women and children.

Second, are there alternative ways to increase women's participation in politics without reservation? Critics suggest that reforms within political parties such as mandating a certain percentage of female candidates or promoting internal democracy could be more effective. They argue that structural problems like the influence of money power, criminalization of politics, and lack of transparency also act as barriers for women and must be addressed alongside any reservation policy.

The third issue concerns the design of the reservation system itself. Some opponents believe that reserving seats may unintentionally reinforce the idea that women need special treatment to succeed, potentially undermining perceptions of merit. This concern is not new. Even during the debates of the Constituent Assembly, leaders like Renuka Ray expressed apprehension that reservation might limit women's opportunities rather than expand them, by confining them to designated seats instead of allowing them to compete freely across all constituencies.

There is also the argument that reservation alone cannot guarantee genuine empowerment. True political influence depends not just on presence but on the ability to participate independently and effectively. While earlier concerns suggested that women elected through quotas might act as proxies for male relatives, evidence from local governance has largely disproven this assumption, showing that many women leaders exercise real authority and bring fresh perspectives to governance.

Ultimately, the women's reservation Bill represents both a promise and a challenge. It acknowledges a long-standing imbalance in political representation and attempts to correct it through structural intervention. At the same time, it opens up important conversations about

merit, equality, and the broader reforms needed in India's political system. Whether it becomes a transformative force or a symbolic gesture will depend on how it is implemented, supported, and integrated with wider efforts to make politics more inclusive and equitable.¹⁸

2. CONCLUSION:

The discussion makes it clear that the issue is not just about how many women enter politics, but about how much power they are actually able to exercise once they get there. Despite constitutional promises and visible progress, the reality on the ground continues to reflect deep-rooted inequalities. Patriarchal thinking, safety concerns, and practices like proxy leadership quietly limit women's participation, often reducing representation to mere formality rather than real authority.

At the same time, measures like the Women's Reservation Bill show that the State recognises this imbalance and is attempting to correct it. However, laws by themselves cannot change social attitudes that have existed for generations. True empowerment requires more than just seats, it requires independence, confidence, institutional support, and most importantly, acceptance of women as equal decision-makers.

What is encouraging, however, is that wherever women have been given genuine space to lead, they have delivered effective and people-centric governance. This clearly shows that the problem is not capability, but opportunity.

In the end, the journey towards equal political participation is still incomplete. Real change will only come when women are not just elected, but are also heard, respected, and allowed to lead without control or constraint.

¹⁸ The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2023.