

# Role of Women in Political Decision Making in India

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## Abstract

India is world's largest indirect democracy which means government is by the people, of the people and for the people. The role of women in political decision making is immense importance from time immemorial. It is related to strengthening the social, political, moral and economic position of women. The study reveals how women participated in political decision making to acquire confidence and to reduce the gender gap by political participation. The study shows the example of Indira Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, Jayalalita, Prativa Patil, as well as Mayabati. Not only in legislative field but also in Judiciary field the role of the women is none the less. The study also shows women's participation in politics in Vedic period, Medieval period as well as pre Independence period. In Vedic period women got equal chances like men to participate in political decision making, but the position of the women started diminishing in later Vedic period. Jainism and Buddhism were the two potent protestant movement which had brought severe changes in the structure of society as well as gave the equal status to *women* in political and social field. The study also reveal the participation of women in Indian freedom movement like Rani Laxmi bai of Jhansi, Sorojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Pritilata Wadedar, Sucheta kripalani. They all fought against the mightiest British empire. The study concludes with the fact that the mindset of the people need to be change then only country will progress. Awareness campaign regarding women's legal and political rights should be organised to inspire women to participate in political rallies, meetings, campaign e.t.c. It has become an imperative necessity to provide opportunity to women in decision making process at all levels to make empowerment of women a meaningful reality.

**Key Words-** *Empowerment, Political, Decision making, Participation*

## Introduction

Women empowerment is a process through which women can do whatever they like to do and accomplish in a circumstances what they were previously denied to do. Women empowerment can be defined in various terms such as social empowerment, political empowerment and economic empowerment all three goes hand in hand. On other hand it can be said that empowerment means to take their own decision and also being able to act on them without any external manipulation. Empowerment of women is necessary in every developmental field as it enhance both quality and quantity of human resources available for development. In India in

political decision making role of the women is not negligible. Women are participating in political meetings, rallies as well as contesting election, run for political parties. The strongest areas of women's political participation are political activism and voting. Indian constitution guarantees equal rights to all but conducive environment should be created to enjoy these rights. The women should not be manipulated in political field in most of the cases it is seen either they belong from well to do family or wives, daughter or widows of politicians. As economic and political fields go hand in hand so women should be economically independent to take inroads into male dominated institution.

## **I Status of women in early Indian society**

Historian A.S. Altekar divides the society into various groups. In the Rig Veda, (2500 BC to 1500 BC), the position of women was fairly satisfactory. The girls were educated equal to that of boys and had to pass through the period of Brahmacharya. Both boys and girls were allowed to undergo 'upanayana' [sacred thread] ceremony which initiated them to education. Women had considerable freedom in the different activities of the social and political life. In the age between (1500BC to 500BC) there was a gradual decline in the level of female education. System of sending girls to famous teachers or centres of education was discouraged. During (500BC to AD500), the position of women deteriorated considerably. The Aryan

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wife's could get Sanskrit education while the non Aryan's wife were not allowed to do so. The Upanayana or the thread ceremony and education for girls were discouraged. During AD500 to AD1800, apart from property rights to women, their position continued to deteriorate. The Upanayana ceremony was completely stopped. Women came to be regarded in the same lines as the shudras. The marriageable age of the girls was further lowered down. Sati became common among the warrior classes. Widow remarriage was gradually withdrawn and the purdah system (veil) began to get footing in the Indian society. In the history of Indian society, the age of Jainism and Buddhism are considered as little progressive to previous times. Women enjoyed a bit of freedom and certain opportunity, particularly in spiritual matters. During this time, female education was encouraged. It was possible that women could become missionaries and even they could remain unmarried. However, in the 'Jataka' books of Buddhists, women were criticized as evils, thieves, unreliable and wild. According to Buddhism, woman can reach the highest stage, she is, however inferior to men.

## **II Participation of women in politics in medieval time period**

In Medieval time we can get the example of Razia Sultana(1236-1240) she was the daughter of Illutmish was the only female ever to rule the Delhi Sultanate. She possessed all the qualities to administer the kingdom. Another notable female figure during medieval time period was Mehr-un-Nissa, popularly known as Nur Jahan wife of Jahangir. She was the most powerful and influential woman at the Mughal court when the Empire was at its peak of its power and glory. She was in charge of Imperial seal and her consent was

necessary before any document or order receive legal validity. Nur Jahan was granted certain honour or privileges which were never enjoyed by any other Mughal empress before or after.

### **III Participation of Women in Freedom movement**

In pre Independence India women came forward and fought against colonialism as well as patriarchal and traditional society. Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi broke all the norms and became the ruler of Jhansi and took all legal decision by herself and protested against the injustice of Doctrine of Lapse and actively participated in Revolt of 1857. Begum Hazrat Mahal, Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Aruna Asaf Ali, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Sucheta Kriplani, Bhikaji Cama, Savitribai Phule, Kasturba

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Gandhi, Kamala Nehru, Padmaja Naidu, Kalpana Dutta, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Sister Nivedita Margaret Nobel, Miralphonse, Meera Behn, Sarla Bhen, etc. contributed immensely during freedom movement. Annie Besant was a women activists, When first world war broke out in 1914 she joined Indian national congress and helped to launch Home Rule League to campaign for Democracy in India and elected as president of Indian National congress in late 1917. Sarojini Naidu was another notable female figure who took great interest in Indian politics during the colonial rule. Naidu joined the Indian National Movement in the wake of Partition of Bengal in 1905, she travelled in different parts in India delivered lecture on social welfare, Women's empowerment and nationalism. Sarojini Naidu presided over the Annual session of congress in 1925, she was awarded as Kaiser-I Hind- Medal by the British Government by her work during the plague epidemic in India. She played a leading role during Civil Disobedience movement as well as during Quit India Movement. Pritilata Wadedar was another female revolutionary who took active part in politics. During that time women were not allowed to join in revolutionary group, but Pritilata Wadeddar showed that courage to join the group and under the guidance of Surjo Sen led an attack to Pahartali European Club.

### **IV Initiative taken by Indian government to Empower women after Independence**

According to 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment act at local level initiative has been taken by government to reserve 33 percent of seats for women. Though small but it's a drastic attempt taken by the government regarding empowering women. Women are making use of power they are doing developmental work like literacy camping, health awareness programme, providing drinking water, awareness about domestic violence. In 1993 a constitutional amendment was passed in India that called for a random one third of village council leader, or Pradhan, positions in Gram panchayat to be reserved for women. A large number of women legislators should work together towards empowering the women. Emphasise should be given towards women education so that they not only became aware of social and political rights but also can develop a political mind.

## V Participation of Women in politics after Independence

Since ancient times women had played a decisive role in nation building process in India. Politics and administration were male dominated area. However many women folk such as Late Indira Gandhi proved to everyone by holding the post of the first woman prime minister of India. Sonia Gandhi played an active part in Indian National Congress. Sushma swaraj's style of working and her work regarding the foreign affair is even appreciated by her critics, She was the minister of external affair. Country's most able IPS officer Kiran Bedi also proved her worth as an able administrator from time to time. India has also seen female President when Pratiba Patil was in the post. In contemporary political scenario Jaylailita, and Mahebouba Mufti served the states like Uttarpradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. Mamata Banerjee is one of the leading figure of West Bengal doing different types of developmental work for the benefit of the society, Her initiative of "Kanyashree Prakalpa" that is a developmental work towards women of economically backward families with cash so that families do not arrange marriage for their child before eighteen years. The aim was to inspire the girl child to pursue higher studies It has been given International recognition by United Kingdoms Department of International Development and the UNICEF .

## VI Constrain faced by women to join in politics

Women's participation in politics not only provides a strong message globally in terms of equality and freedom of liberty but also provide space for the women to exercise democratic politics in India has one of the strongest laws that provide women a life with full honour and dignity. But the customs, patriarchal set ups and societal norms have always treated them as subordinate to men. They are always taught to be submissive. Because of unequal distribution of resources, women do not have adequate resources, be it economic, material or human. Women are expected to work in private sphere only and are generally barred from working outside their homes. Their financial dependence over men also keeps them away from strong political affiliations. Illiteracy is one of the main hurdles in making women as politically empowered. Because of lack of understanding they do not know about their basic and political rights. The parties not only discriminate in terms of seat allotments in the elections, but also in the party ranks. Poverty is another reason which creates a barrier to women participation in politics. The rate of school dropout is also higher. Less number of women can be seen in higher studies as a leave their school before completing their basic studies. Class and caste structure also proved a big hurdle towards women's empowerment. Most of the women in lower caste family engaged in less paying work to take care of their families. After marriage they don't even get the share of their parent's property. Women not only have lack of awareness about their rights enshrined in India constitution but also the lack of political will also as they are not motivated by their family members. Women's low health status in the country is also a major constraint in women's participation. Women's health are neglected as compared to male in many families as the family preferred the male child.

Results

Figure 1 depicts the trends which were characteristic of the Lok Sabha election of 2014. The enhanced female participation had an interesting tale of its own. If there were such developed states as Delhi and Goa in the top with regard to registering a substantial rise in it, there were such so-called “backward” states as Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh which also came on top whilst indicating the increased trends in women participation. It goes on to prove the fact that whether it was from the advanced states or from the otherwise lesser cousins of those states, women made their presence felt in terms of turning up for voting. The women voters wanted to make sure that they are as much part of mainstream politics as their male counterparts. The urge to be recognized as a force to reckon with’ was prevalent as much with the big city female voters as was with the small town ones. The participation of the female voter saw ascendancy in 22 of the states during the Lok Sabha election as compared to 2009.

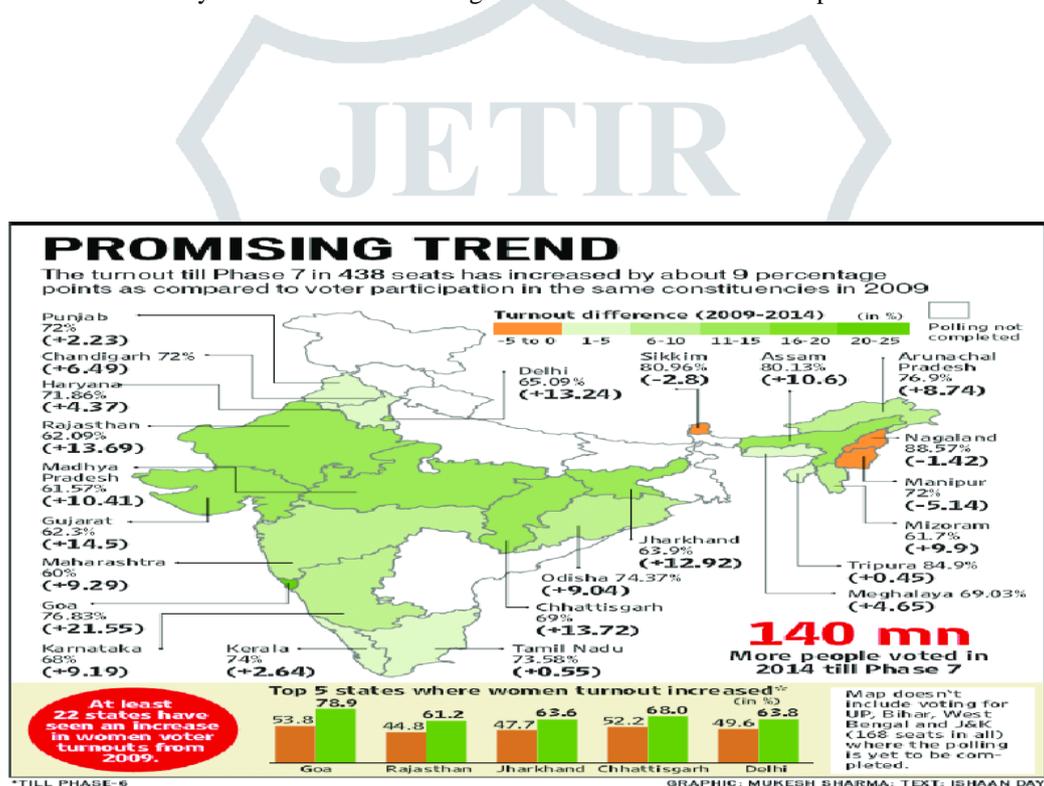


Fig-1 voter Turnout till Phase 7, General Election, 2014. Source :

[http://www.hindustantimes.com/Images/popup/2014/5/02\\_05\\_14metro10.gif](http://www.hindustantimes.com/Images/popup/2014/5/02_05_14metro10.gif)

In all, seven female ministers were inducted in the cabinet of the government formed after the historic 2014 election. They were

- Smt. Sushma Swaraj – Cabinet Minister for External Affairs .
- Smt. Smriti Zubin Irani – Cabinet Minister for Human Resource Development (now shifted to the Textile Ministry).
- Dr. Najma A. Heptulla – Cabinet Minister for Minority Affairs.
- Smt. Maneka Sanjay Gandhi – Cabinet Minister for Women and Child Development.
- Smt. Harsimrat Kaur Badal – Cabinet Minister for Food Processing Industries.
- Sushri Uma Bharati – Cabinet Minister for Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation.
- Smt. Nirmala Sitharaman – Minister of State for Commerce and Industry (Independent Charge) and finance corporate affair

### Discussion

It can be seen that women participation in political arena is not less than the men. They are also interested and enthusiastic in politics despite all constraints. Uttar Pradesh send highest number of female MP's followed by West Bengal. Many female MP's have voiced different types of social issues like child education, abolition of child labour, improved gender ratio, sensitization towards various women issues, hygiene, etc. Women are constantly fighting to get their demand regarding social, economic domestic as well as political field. Since time immemorial we can see women were victimised by different types of social evils like sati, purdah system, child marriage, polygamy. They were denied of education as well as their health and nutrition was also neglected. According to Swami Vivekananda "The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women". The outcome of the Lok Sabha election of 2014 was unprecedented in many ways. One such aspect was the rise of the female, as a voter and as a representative. For the first time the female voters showed so much interest in exercising their right to give vote and gave the message to the nation that one half cannot complete the work if other half is neglected.

### Conclusion

To conclude one can say women played same role as men in nation building process. If right opportunities are given to them they can excel in every sphere. In domestic life, in social life, in economic life, in political life also they are successful. They are no longer keeping themselves under the veil. They are coming out by breaking all the barriers imposed on them in male dominated society. Indian government has passed different types of laws regarding the empowerment of women, the women should know how to utilise it at the right time. As more and more women will join in the political decision making process they will become much more confident to raise the voice against the injustice done to the women. They can present the demand of the womenfolk in the

parliament to pass it as a law. Men and Women are like both the wings of a bird, if one wing is cut down the bird won't be able to fly. So we should go ahead by holding each others hand towards the aim of making a successful Democracy.

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