



POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN STATE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLIES: CHALLENGES, TRENDS AND PROSPECTS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT Political representation is a fundamental indicator of democratic inclusion and equality. Women constitute nearly half of India's population, yet their representation in political institutions, particularly State Legislative Assemblies, remains significantly lower than their demographic strength. State legislatures play a crucial role in India's federal system because they formulate laws, determine public expenditure, and address issues relating directly to education, health, welfare, employment, and social justice. Therefore, the meaningful participation of women in these institutions is essential for strengthening representative democracy. This research paper examines the nature, trends, determinants, challenges, and future prospects of women's political representation in Indian State Legislative Assemblies. The study is based primarily on secondary sources, including constitutional provisions, Election Commission of India data, and reports of legislative research institutions, books, journal articles, and government documents. The paper finds that women's representation has improved gradually but remains inadequate and highly uneven across states. Political-party nomination practices, patriarchal social structures, economic inequality, electoral competition, family responsibilities, and gender-based discrimination continue to restrict women's access to legislative politics. The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023 has created an important constitutional framework for increasing women's representation, although its implementation remains linked to future delimitation processes. The paper argues that legal reforms must be accompanied by changes in political-party practices, leadership development, campaign support, and broader social attitudes. Greater representation of women can improve the inclusiveness, responsiveness, and legitimacy of State Legislative Assemblies.

KEYWORDS : Women, Political Representation, State Legislative Assemblies, Democracy, Gender Equality, Electoral Politics, and Women's Reservation.

1. INTRODUCTION:-

Democracy is based on the principles of political equality, participation, representation, and accountability. A democratic system cannot be considered fully representative when a major section of society remains inadequately represented in institutions of political power. Women constitute approximately half of the population and participate extensively in social, economic, and community life; however, their representation in formal political institutions has historically remained limited.

In India, the struggle for women's political participation has a long history. Women actively participated in the national movement and made significant contributions to the struggle for independence. After independence, the Constitution of India provided women with equal political rights, including universal adult suffrage and the right to contest elections. Nevertheless, the existence of formal equality has not automatically produced substantive equality in political representation.

State Legislative Assemblies are particularly important in this context. They are directly connected to citizens and exercise legislative and financial authority over a wide range of subjects. Policies relating to public health, education, agriculture, local development, social welfare, law and order, and the implementation of many welfare programmes are strongly influenced by state-level political institutions. Consequently, the participation of women in State Assemblies is essential not only as a matter of justice but also for ensuring that diverse experiences and social concerns are represented in public policymaking.

Available evidence demonstrates that women's representation varies considerably among Indian states. PRS Legislative Research has noted that no state had achieved even 20 per cent representation of women in its Legislative Assembly in the data reviewed around the debate on women's reservation; some states performed relatively better, while others had extremely low or negligible representation. A recent comparative study similarly argues that women's representation across state legislatures remains uneven and that political-party gatekeeping and regional social structures are important explanations for this variation (Morang, J., & Kurbah, M. M-2026).

Thus, the study of women's political representation in State Legislative Assemblies is important for understanding the relationship between democracy, gender, power, and social transformation.

2. Meaning and Concept of Political Representation:-

Political representation refers to the process through which citizens and social groups participate in governing institutions through elected representatives. In a representative democracy, legislators are expected to articulate public interests, participate in lawmaking,

scrutinize the executive, and ensure accountability.

Women's representation can be understood through several dimensions:

2.1 Descriptive Representation

Descriptive representation refers to the numerical presence of women in political institutions. When the proportion of women legislators increases, the composition of the legislature becomes more reflective of society.

2.2 Substantive Representation

Substantive representation refers to the extent to which elected representatives promote and address the interests and concerns of women. A woman legislator does not automatically represent all women in the same way, but greater participation can increase the visibility of issues such as education, health, safety, employment, property rights, and social welfare.

2.3 Symbolic Representation

The presence of women in positions of political authority has symbolic significance. Women leaders can challenge traditional assumptions regarding leadership and encourage younger generations to participate in public life.

2.4 Intersectional Representation

Women are not a homogeneous group. Their political experiences may differ according to caste, class, religion, region, education, occupation, and social background. Therefore, meaningful representation must also consider the diversity among women.

3. Objectives of the Study:-

The major objectives of the present study are:

1. To examine the status and trends of women's representation in State Legislative Assemblies in India.
2. To analyse the constitutional and institutional framework supporting women's political participation.
3. To identify the major factors influencing the election of women legislators.
4. To examine the challenges faced by women in electoral and legislative politics.
5. To assess the importance of women's representation for democratic governance and public policy.
6. To study the prospects of increasing women's representation in the future.
7. To suggest measures for strengthening women's participation in State Legislative Assemblies.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:-

The present research is based on a descriptive and analytical methodology. It relies primarily on secondary sources of information.

Sources of Data

The study uses:

- The Constitution of India and constitutional amendments;
- Election Commission of India reports and electoral statistics;
- Reports and publications of legislative research organizations;
- Books and academic research articles;
- Government reports and policy documents;
- Published studies on women, elections, political representation, and governance.

The Election Commission of India is an important source for election-related information and publishes statistical reports that include candidate and election data, including reports on women candidates for Assembly elections (Election Commission of India. *Atlas-2024*).

The study is qualitative in nature and focuses on identifying broad patterns rather than conducting constituency-level statistical analysis.

5. Historical Background of Women's Political Participation in India:-

Women's participation in Indian politics has developed through several historical stages. During the freedom movement, women emerged as active participants in public and political activities. Leaders and activists such as Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kripalani and many others demonstrated women's capacity for political leadership.

After independence, India adopted universal adult franchise from the very beginning. Unlike several countries where women acquired voting rights only after prolonged struggles, the Indian Constitution guaranteed equal political citizenship irrespective of gender.

However, the transition from voting rights to political representation has been slow. Women have increasingly participated as voters, but the proportion of women contesting and winning elections has remained comparatively low. This distinction between political participation as voters and political representation as elected legislators is one of the central features of Indian democracy.

The most significant institutional advancement occurred at the local level through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which provided reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies. These measures substantially expanded women's participation in grassroots governance and demonstrated that institutional mechanisms can increase women's access to political office.

The experience of local government reservation strengthened the argument for increasing women's representation in State Legislatures and Parliament.

6. Constitutional and Legal Framework:-

The Constitution of India provides the normative foundation for gender equality in political life.

6.1 Article 14: Equality Before Law

Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of laws. It establishes the principle that women and men should enjoy equal status as citizens.

6.2 Article 15

Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds including sex. At the same time, Article 15(3) permits the State to make special provisions for women and children, thereby providing constitutional support for affirmative measures.

6.3 Article 16

Article 16 provides equality of opportunity in matters relating to public employment. Although it primarily concerns employment, it reflects the broader constitutional commitment to equality.

6.4 Directive Principles and Social Justice

The Directive Principles encourage the State to promote social and economic justice and reduce inequalities. These principles provide an important normative basis for policies promoting women's empowerment.

6.5 Reservation in Local Self-Government

The constitutional amendments relating to Panchayats and Municipalities introduced reservations for women, leading to a major increase in their representation at the grassroots level. The success of this policy has provided important experience for wider political representation.

6.6 The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023

The 106th Constitutional Amendment provides for reservation of one-third of seats for women in the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and the Legislative Assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, including within the seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The measure represents a major constitutional development for women's political representation. However, its operationalization is connected with the future census and delimitation process as provided under the constitutional framework.

7. Present Status and Trends of Women's Representation:-

Women's representation in Indian State Legislative Assemblies has shown gradual progress but remains substantially below the level required for balanced representation. The pattern is uneven across states.

PRS Legislative Research reported that women's representation in the assemblies it reviewed was generally in single digits or low double digits, with Chhattisgarh among the highest-performing states at about 18 per cent and some states recording extremely low representation.

A 2026 comparative study of high- and low-performing states similarly observed that the average share of women in Indian state legislatures has remained around the single-digit level for a long period and highlighted major differences among states such as Chhattisgarh, West Bengal and Jharkhand on one side and states with very limited representation on the other.

The wider electoral context also demonstrates a continuing gender gap in formal political representation. In the 2024 Lok Sabha election, women constituted 9.6 per cent of contestants and 13.6 per cent of elected candidates, according to the Election Commission's electoral atlas. Although this figure relates to Parliament rather than State Assemblies, it illustrates the continuing challenge of converting women's participation into equal electoral representation.

The basic problem is therefore not simply that women are less likely to win elections. They are also frequently less likely to receive party nominations and sufficient campaign resources.

8. Factors Influencing Women's Representation:-

8.1 Political Party Nomination

Political parties play the most important gatekeeping role in electoral politics. A candidate generally requires party support, organizational networks, financial resources, and political visibility. When parties nominate relatively few women, the number is women who can enter legislatures remains limited.

The recent comparative literature on Indian states identifies party candidate selection and political gatekeeping as central determinants of variation in women's representation.

8.2 Social and Cultural Attitudes

Patriarchal attitudes continue to influence perceptions of leadership. Politics is often viewed as a male-dominated public sphere, while women are expected to carry primary responsibility for domestic and family work.

8.3 Economic Resources

Electoral campaigns require substantial financial resources. Women often have less independent access to wealth, property, networks, and fundraising opportunities.

8.4 Education and Political Awareness

Education can increase political awareness, confidence, communication skills, and access to leadership opportunities. However, education alone cannot guarantee electoral representation because political parties and institutional structures remain decisive.

8.5 Family and Political Networks

Political families and established networks can provide women with opportunities to enter politics. While such pathways may increase the number of women representatives, they can also limit access for women without political connections.

8.6 Caste, Class and Regional Differences

Women's political opportunities differ significantly across social and regional contexts. Research on women in Indian state politics has found that social position can influence both political participation and the policy priorities associated with women's representation.

9. Major Challenges Faced by Women in State Legislative Politics:-

9.1 Underrepresentation

The most obvious challenge is the low numerical presence of women in State Assemblies. Without sufficient numbers, women may find it difficult to influence party decisions and legislative agendas.

9.2 Gender Stereotypes

Women politicians are frequently judged according to different standards than men. Their appearance, family life, and personal behavior may receive disproportionate attention.

9.3 Violence and Harassment

Women in politics may experience intimidation, harassment, character assassination, and other forms of political hostility. Such conditions discourage many qualified women from entering public life.

9.4 Lack of Financial Support

Limited access to campaign finance and political networks can create major barriers for first-generation women candidates.

9.5 Limited Opportunities for Leadership

Women may be present in political parties but remain underrepresented in influential decision-making positions. Consequently, their access to party tickets and winnable constituencies may be restricted.

9.6 Double Burden of Public and Private Responsibilities

Many women politicians must balance political responsibilities with family and domestic expectations. This unequal distribution of care work can limit their ability to participate fully in political activities.

9.7 Media Bias

Media coverage can reinforce stereotypes by focusing on women politicians' personal lives rather than their policy positions and legislative performance.

10. Importance of Women's Representation in State Assemblies:-

10.1 Strengthening Democracy

A legislature should broadly reflect the diversity of the population. Greater women's representation improves the representative character and legitimacy of democratic institutions.

10.2 Inclusion of Diverse Experiences

Women may bring experiences and perspectives that have historically received insufficient attention in political decision-making.

10.3 Policy Priorities

Research has shown that the gender and social position of legislators can be associated with differences in policy choices. Evidence from Indian states suggests that women legislators from different social groups may influence public expenditure, health, education, and other policy outcomes in different ways.

10.4 Role-Model Effect

Women legislators can inspire girls and young women to participate in public life. Their visibility can challenge the belief that political leadership belongs primarily to men.

10.5 Improved Institutional Responsiveness

Greater diversity within legislatures can improve the capacity of institutions to understand and respond to the needs of different sections of society.

11. Women's Reservation and Its Significance:-

The demand for reservation of seats for women in legislatures emerged from the recognition that formal equality had not produced equal political representation. Supporters of reservation argue that political institutions dominated by men cannot be transformed solely through voluntary measures.

The constitutional recognition of one-third reservation for women in legislatures is therefore an important step toward structural equality. Its major significance includes:

- Increasing the number of women legislators;
- Encouraging political parties to develop women leaders;
- Reducing barriers created by male-dominated political networks;
- Creating new role models for future generations;
- Increasing the possibility of gender-sensitive legislative debates.

However, reservation alone cannot solve all problems. The quality of representation will also depend upon political training, party democracy, campaign resources, legislative capacity, and women's ability to exercise independent political leadership.

12. Role of Political Parties:-

Political parties are central to improving women's representation. They should not treat women candidates merely as symbolic representatives. Political parties can take the following steps:

1. Adopt internal targets for women's representation.
2. Nominate women in winnable constituencies.
3. Provide financial and organizational support to women candidates.
4. Create leadership training programmes.
5. Promote women within party decision-making structures.
6. Establish mechanisms against harassment and discrimination.
7. Encourage young and first-generation women leaders.

The effectiveness of constitutional reform will depend partly on whether political parties genuinely support women's political advancement.

13. Suggestions for Increasing Women's Representation:-

13.1 Effective Implementation of Constitutional Provisions

The constitutional framework for women's reservation should be implemented in accordance with the prescribed legal and institutional processes.

13.2 Greater Role of Political Parties

Political parties should voluntarily increase women's nominations and ensure that women receive tickets from competitive constituencies.

13.3 Financial Assistance

Special mechanisms can be developed to support women candidates, particularly first-generation entrants without family political networks.

13.4 Leadership and Capacity Building

Training in public speaking, legislative procedure, public policy, campaign management, media communication, and digital technology can strengthen women's political participation.

13.5 Safer Political Environment

Political institutions and parties should establish strong mechanisms to prevent harassment, intimidation, and gender-based violence.

13.6 Public Awareness

Educational institutions, civil society organizations, and the media should promote the idea that political leadership is equally appropriate for women and men.

13.7 Research and Gender-Disaggregated Data

Regular publication and analysis of gender-disaggregated electoral and legislative data can help identify gaps and monitor progress. The Election Commission's statistical reporting system provides an important basis for such analysis.

13.8 Supports for Diverse Women Leaders

Efforts should include women from rural areas, marginalized communities, minority groups, economically weaker sections, and first-generation political families.

14. DISCUSSION:-

The issue of women's representation in State Legislative Assemblies should not be understood merely as a question of numbers. Numerical representation is important, but democratic inclusion also requires meaningful participation, independent leadership, and the ability to influence public policy.

India has made considerable progress in women's participation at the grassroots level. However, the transition from local leadership to State Assemblies remains difficult. One of the major obstacles is the gap between political participation and political power. Women may vote in large numbers and participate in party activities, but access to

nominations and winnable seats remains constrained.

The variation among states also demonstrates that economic development alone does not automatically produce higher women's representation. Political-party practices, regional culture, social structure, and institutional opportunities can be equally important. This suggests that improving women's representation requires a multidimensional strategy rather than a single policy intervention.

Women's representation should therefore be considered an essential component of democratic quality. A democracy that provides women the right to vote but does not create adequate opportunities for them to participate in decision-making remains incomplete in terms of substantive political equality.

15. CONCLUSION:-

Women's political representation in State Legislative Assemblies is one of the most important issues in the development of inclusive democracy in India. Although women have equal constitutional rights and their participation in elections has increased, their presence in legislative institutions remains inadequate. The persistence of low and uneven representation indicates that formal political equality is insufficient without structural reforms.

The study shows that political-party gatekeeping, patriarchal attitudes, financial barriers, limited access to political networks, and gender stereotypes are major obstacles to women's political advancement. At the same time, the experience of local self-government and the constitutional commitment to expanded women's representation provide significant reasons for optimism.

The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023 represents an important milestone in the movement toward gender-balanced legislatures. Its future impact, however, will depend on effective implementation and complementary measures to develop women's leadership and political capacity.

Ultimately, increasing women's representation should not be viewed as a concession to a particular group. It is a democratic necessity. State Legislative Assemblies that include a stronger and more diverse presence of women are likely to be more representative, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of society. The empowerment of women in politics is therefore closely connected with the strengthening of democracy itself.

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