17 Voices from the Grassroots to the Lok Sabha: Feminine Leadership in India's Political Landscape

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Abstract

The politics of political leadership by women in India run the spectrum of the village panchayats to the Parliament and this is both indicative of a great strides and lack of representation. This chapter focuses on the issue of feminine leadership in the political arena in India and it follows the path of women leaders in the nation starting with grassroots level of government and up to the national level. It gives a summary of representation of women at the local and parliamentary level including the current level and the effect of the constitutional initiatives such as 73rd/74th Amendments and most recently the Women Reservation Bill. The chapter shows successes and struggles of female leaders by case studies of outstanding personalities, both local leaders (women sarpanches and legislators) and national leaders (Droupadi Murmu, tribal woman who took her way to the top, becoming President and Indira Gandhi, the first woman Prime Minister of the country). An analysis of the literature and empirical evidence illuminates the role of women in office in building governance and policy priorities that in most cases promote education, health and inclusive development. The structural restrictions including patriarchal norms, intersecting disadvantages of caste and religion and institutional discrimination are critically discussed and facilitating mechanisms such as gender quotas, capacity-building initiatives and favorable networks are also discussed. The chapter ends by giving recommendations on how to empower women in political matters and leadership in India by asserting that the voice at the grassroots to the Lok Sabha is crucial in inclusive and gender sensitive governance.

Keywords: Feminine Leadership, Women in Politics, Indian Parliament, Grassroots Governance, Gender Equality

Introduction

Contextual Background

The debate on women in political leadership in India has developed into a story of tokenism in political representation to that of transformative representation. The democratic model based on equality and inclusion, which India has been embracing, has been seeing greater appreciation of the women agency in the legitimacy of governance. Nevertheless, the

number of women elected to legislative bodies has continued to be significantly out of balance to the size of the population. Figure 3 shows that women occupy 15.2 percent of the Lok Sabha and 13.2 percent of the Rajya Sabha, with India ranking lower than the world average of 26.5. This inequality underlines the fact that there is a long-standing gender difference within the political sphere of India, although it has strong democratic lineaments.

In the past, Indian women have been involved heavily in politics and reformist programs - be it the independence struggle spearheaded by the likes of Sarojini Naidu and Aruna Asaf Ali to post-independent leaders like Indira Gandhi who became the first woman PM in the country in 1966. Still, the rise of the grassroots mobilization to the top decision-making positions in the country has been influenced by the structural barriers, cultural restrictions and social inequalities (Chopra, 2020). Indian feminine leadership can therefore be seen not as an act of representation but as an act of moral, emotional and ethical dominance in a patriarchal society.

The Feminist Leadership Discourse in Flux

The theory of feminine leadership postulates that the leadership skills and traits commonly associated with women, including empathy, cooperation and ethical decision-making, can be applied in the form of a new model in governance (Eagly and Carli, 2018). These qualities are highly intertwined with socio-cultural realities on the Indian context. Women leaders are likely to work with various identities such as caste, class, religion and region as they manoeuvre through masculine dominated world of authority.

The feminine leadership conceptual framework is the inverse of the Western liberal feminist notion of equality in the access to power, namely, it views leadership as nurturing, participatory and community-oriented. As Nussbaum (2021) says, feminist ethics in leadership is aware of the relationship aspects of power, which are based on care, responsibility and collective good, instead of hierarchical control. The Indian women leaders, especially in the grassroots, practice such characteristics in the participatory style of governance, prioritization of policy on welfare schemes and peaceful conflict resolution based on dialogue but not force.

Historical Development of Woman Political Participation

The participation of women in the politics of India dates back to the nationalist era (1905-1947) when their involvement in activities such as movements like Swadeshi and Non-Cooperation, triggered political consciousness. The equality before the law (Article 14), non-discrimination (Article 15), as well as the equality of opportunity in public employment (Article 16) were guaranteed by the Indian Constitution (1950) post-independence. These constitutional commitments however took decades to be realized in political representation.

It was slow coming after the first Lok Sabha (1952) which had only 22 women MPs among the 489 (4.5 percent). Regarding the 17 th Lok Sabha (2019), there were a record 78 women MPs (14.3 percent), but parity is a long way off (Election Commission of India, 2024). Even with these insignificant figures, the symbolism of women in parliament politics has increased. Pioneering policies like the 73 rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992) required a 33 percentage point reservation of women in the panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) and the urban local bodies. This constitutional intervention transformed the politics of women

on the grassroots level by forming more than 1.4 million elected women representatives (EWRs) throughout India (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2023).

Such structural changes have played a crucial role in changing the politics of socialization by rural women. Women were able to move to state assemblies and Parliament and this was facilitated by panchayat institutions that were training grounds on leadership. Feminine leadership therefore became like a spectrum- starting with the microcosm of deciding within a village up to the macrocosm of national policymaking.

Feminine Leadership: Lens of Concept

Feminine leadership is not a term that implies biological determinism, but a sociocultural and moral one towards governance. According to the arguments of scholars like Blackmore (2013), feminine leadership is based on collaboration, empathy and sustainability as opposed to masculine competitive and hierarchical paradigms of leadership. These attributes appeal to Gandhian principles of service and common good and are close to native conceptions of leadership such as seva (service) and samajik nyay (social justice).

Women grassroots leaders like Chhavi Rajawat (Sarpanch, Soda village, Rajasthan) and Arati Devi (Odisha) have been able to reflect the ideals through the combination of contemporary management practices with the beliefs of the local community. Their leadership goes beyond being a symbolic representation of a process of social-political transformation. Likewise, national figures such as Droupadi Murmu, who ascended to power as a tribal woman President of India (2022), is a representation of the democratisation of power and bringing marginalised voices into the country.

Relevance and Justification of Research in the Present Conjuncture

This is an important development in the history of democracy in India as the recent enactment of the Women Reservation Bill (2023) guarantees women 33 percent reservation in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies. Nevertheless, the three-decade gap since its launch in 1996 reveals the inert nature of political systems to entrench gender equality (Kumar & Singh, 2024). This legislative change is a confirmation of the necessity to examine the impact of feminine leadership at grassroots on national politics and institutional changes to consolidate this change further.

The emergence of regional women leaders which include Mamata Banerjee (West Bengal), Mayawati (Uttar Pradesh) and Jayalalithaa (Tamil Nadu) have shown that feminine leadership can offer an alternative paradigm of governance. Their leadership is characterized by populist mobilization, welfare-focused policies and moral authority, which are unique to the Indian manifestation of feminine power, which is both empathizing and commanding (Banerjee, 2020).

So, the analysis of the voices of the grassroots to the Lok Sabha gives a multidimensional perspective to understand how Indian women convert personal resilience to political legitimacy. This question does not only add to the feminist political theory, but also shapes the praxis of inclusive governance.

Chapter Objectives and Structure

This chapter seeks to:

- Examine the trajectory of women's political participation from grassroots institutions to the national Parliament.

- Analyze the defining characteristics of feminine leadership in the Indian political context.

- Explore the barriers and enablers shaping women's journey toward political representation.

- Illustrate the policy and governance impact of women leaders through case studies.

Literature Review

The literature of women political representation in India is interdisciplinary- feminist political theory, development studies and sociology. In the literature, the marginalization of women in formal politics of the past, as well as their gradual recovery of agency throughout the levels of governance, is reflected.

The paradox of women empowerment in India was first described by Kishwar (1996), who observed that although India has a rich history of female figures in the mythology and politics, there was little involvement of women in governance because of the conservatism and patriarchal party systems. Later studies, including Rai (2002) and Jayal (2006), investigated institutional reformation seeking to correct such an imbalance especially via gender quotas and local self-governance.

The 73 rd and 74 th Constitutional Amendments (1992) were noted to be decisive in democratising gender representation. As evidenced by scholars like Buch (2000) and Singh (2010), these provisions in the constitution not only raised the number of votes but also enhanced the influence of women in the decision-making process of the country and especially in such areas as sanitation, education and health. Nonetheless, social capital, literacy and institutional reinforcements all matter to the effectiveness of these reservations, as Beaman et al. (2012) have observed in their randomised field experiment in the Indian villages.

A gap between descriptive and substantive representation has also been studied by the political scientists (Phillips, 1995). Though there is an increase in the number of women in office, they cannot influence the outcome of the legislative process. Basu (2016) points out that feminine leadership should not be just visible to be effective in the policy priorities.

Recent feminist writers such as Rai and Spary (2019) have added to the discussion and connected women political participation with the intersectional identity- caste, tribe, religion and region. Their examination shows that the road of Dalit, tribal and Muslim women into politics is quite different than elite upper castes. Feminine leadership in India is therefore not a collective phenomenon, but multi-faceted mosaic, which mirrors a variety of socio-political realities.

Comparatively, on a global scale, Paxton and Hughes (2021) believe that gender quotas are not sufficient to bring equality without political will, training and institutional changes. In India, local-level quotas have achieved more than one million elected women representatives (EWRs), but nationally, women representation is still miles short.

As a growing literature (Bhatia, 2023; Roy and Jha, 2022) points out, the Women Reservation Bill (2023) is both an accomplishment and a challenge the Bill formally enshrines gender justice but raises open questions about intersectional inclusion especially of women of color backgrounds.

In such a way, the current research is focused on the following three themes:

- The structural reform (constitutional and legal) has increased the access of women in political office.

- Cultural and institutional barriers still limit effective participation.

- Aspirin leadership should be re-packaged outside the figures and become an ethical and inclusive form of leadership.

Women Leaders the Role of Women in Panchayats to Parliament

- **The Grassroots Revolution: Panchayati Raj and political awakening of Women**

Institutionalization of women-one-third reservation in panchayati raj institutions (PRIs), the 73rd Amendment Act (1992) was a landmark in gender governance in India. This amendment provided women with more than 1.4 million jobs in 250,000 gram panchayats (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2023). It changed the political culture of small rural India where women, most of whom were illiterate and belonged to discriminated castes started to take their decision-making authority to the open places, which were previously dominated by men.

Empirical evidence shows that women sarpanches have been good leaders in community health, provision of drinking water and education (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004). They tend to have a participatory type of governance based on social good and welfare as opposed to partisan politics. As an example, the representatives of women in Madhya Pradesh and in Kerala focused their policy on sanitation initiatives, female security and school enrollment, which are also gendered policy deliverables.

Upward mobility has also been triggered by grassroots leadership. Numerous community-based leaders have moved to parliament and state assembly. This development supports the continuum model of political strengthening (Buch, 2000) in which political effectiveness developed within the process of local government transfers to greater representational efficacy.

- **Political Consciousness and the Institutional Pathways**

The practice of political participation in grassroot politics has served as a nest of feminist awareness. Women which had first entered the local governance based on reservation quotas became confident, acquired communication skills and understanding of their rights and could challenge the authority of patriarchal governance. This change can be attributed to the concept of the empowerment spiral proposed by Rowlands (1997) according to which personal empowerment will result in collective mobilization and ultimately structural change.

Political training programs that have been launched by the ministry of women and child development and the NGOs such as the hunger project have helped women develop into leaders in rural areas. This type of capacity-building initiatives has enhanced the functional

efficacy of women in PRIs and have enhanced their chances of challenging the state and national elections.

By 2023, more than 10 percent of women in the assemblies of Indian states had been in PRI previously (PRS Legislative Research, 2023). This shows the institutionalized connection of local governance and national representation, which again proves that leadership is instituted at the grassroots but it is developed at the systemic levels.

- **Local to National Parliament: The Political Continuum**

Although the Panchayati Raj reforms democratized the access to power, the shifting of political power between the local and the national is an unequal one. Women are usually slowed down by structural issues such as financial dependency, patriarchal party systems and poor networks. The political parties are not ready to nominate women in constituencies that they can win in parliament, thus continuing with the underrepresentation at the higher levels.

The success stories depict this path. Smriti Irani (Union Minister), Meira Kumar (first woman Speaker of the Lok Sabha) and Sumitra Mahajan (former Speaker of the Lok Sabha) (among others) are examples of how women can cross local barriers with the help of persistence, mentorship and institutional support.

The Women Reservation Bill 2023 offers a way to speed up this continuum by making reservation in the Lok Sabha and the state assemblies a third. When adopted by 2029, it is estimated that women will increase their presence in the national Parliament by around 180 seats (PRS, 2024), which will be an epochal change to the Indian democratic makeup.

Feminine Leadership in India Case Studies

- **Indira Gandhi: Charismatic Power and Centralization of Politics**

Indira Gandhi is a legendary figure in the history of Indian politics which is both worshipped and debated. She was the first and only woman Prime Minister of India (19661977, 19801984) and thus was a parody of female strength against a male political society. Although her leadership style has been characterized as authoritarian, she was resilient, strategic and possesses an intuitive grasp of the socio-political realities in India (Frank, 2019).

Her populist and welfare vision is depicted by the policies of Gandhi nationalization of banks (1969), privy purses abolition (1971) and the slogan Garibi Hatao. She used symbolic maternal pictures, where she represented herself as the Mother of the Nation, which appealed to the electorate (Rao, 2020). However, her administration also demonstrated some contradictions in the feminist terms; she rarely managed to pursue the rights of women as a political agenda on its own, but rather applied the state-centric development.

However, Indira Gandhi replayed the role of politics by making a normal portraiture of a woman as the final decision-maker in a patriarchal polity. Parity between the genders was not brought by her success immediately and it shows that a personal excellence is not the thing that will break down the structures.

- **Droupadi Murmu: GrassRoot to President**

The rise of Droupadi Murmu as the first tribal woman President of India in 2022 after being an Adivasi village in Odisha is the epitome of democratizing the political opportunity. It is

in her career path as a schoolteacher and then MLA, Governor of Jharkhand and finally President that inclusivity enabled by the Indian constitutional system is present (Press Information Bureau, 2022).

The leadership of Murmu presents a combination of gender, ethnicity and marginality. Being an Adivasi woman, her rise signifies a break in the social order in India. Her leadership advocacy promoting the indigenous rights, education and environmental sustainability depicts a very unique feminine and community-focused leadership style. The growth of symbolic and substantive inclusivity has been highlighted as a milestone in representational justice, with scholars referring to her presidency as such (Mishra, 2023).

The journey of Murmu confirms the assumption of this chapter which states that feminine leadership usually takes root in the grassroots activism and the purpose of a country through determination, education and institutional support.

- **Chhavi Rajawat and Arati Devi: The New Folks of Rural Modernity**

Chhavi Rajawat, Sarpanch of Soda village (Rajasthan), got international fame, because of balancing and integrating traditional governance and professional corporate governance. She has graduated in one of the leading business schools and she used her managerial capabilities to introduce water conservation initiatives, digital governance and female education (UN Women, 2020). Her approach to leadership which is characterized by openness and inclusive planning has been quoted as an example of gendered innovation in rural governance.

Likewise, the youngest elected sarpanch in India is Arati Devi of Odisha, who has implemented e-government solutions, recovered self-help organizations of women and enhanced the rate of school enrollment (UNDP, 2021). Their work depicts the integration of empathy and efficiency in feminine leadership as it helps in closing the gap between the realities of the grassroots to the present development models.

The cases studies all illustrate the point that women in leadership such as statecraft of Indira Gandhi, moral leadership of Murmu or participatory governance of Rajawat are a continuum of feminine power across the levels of governance.

- **Feminine Power in State Politics: Regional Leaders**

In other parts of the world, female chief ministers like Mamata Banerjee (West Bengal), Mayawati (Uttar Pradesh) and Jayalalithaa (Tamil Nadu) have presented some of the best exemplars of gendered leadership. Directly opposing education and empowerment of women, Banerjee has based his populist politics on the welfare programs such as Kanyashree Prakalpa and Rupashree (Chatterjee, 2021). The fact that Mayawati is a Dalit woman as a leader redefined caste politics byimbining both symbolic assertion and administrative efficiency (Jaffrelot, 2019). The leadership of Jayalalithaa in Tamil Nadu was a charismatic and social welfare populism based on the women oriented programs including Amma Canteens and free girl child education.

These women leaders symbolize the diversity of feminine leadership in India; aggressive but affectionate, populist but reformistic and strongly embedded within the ideals of social justice.

Feminine Leadership Structural Challenges and Enablers

- **Patriarchal Political Culture**

Even with constitutional protection, Indian politics still functions in a patriarchal system that does not welcome female agency. Women candidates are the most frequently neglected component of electoral politics since they are commonly perceived by political parties as tokens to close the representational optics instead of making substantive decisions (Chakraborty, 2021). The works of Rai and Spary (2019) emphasize that women are often put on a list of soft portfolios that include health, education and social welfare, whereas a significant part of ministries, which include finance, defense and home affairs, is occupied by males.

The deep-rooted gender stereotypes are the ones that promote the notion that women lack stamina or even assertiveness in the political life. Such stereotypes are supported by the social norms according to which women are expected to support families first rather than social activities (Bhattacharya, 2020). This two-fold burden minimizes the women presence in the grass-root mobilization and political networking, which is the ability to win an election.

- **Economic Constraints**

Politics involves high costs in terms of campaigns, travelling and administration of the constituency. Women, particularly those in rural or disadvantaged groups, tend to be deprived of their own sources of financial resources (Chopra, 2020). Domination of money in the political sphere of elections strengthens the hierarchies of classes and gender. As an illustration, in the 2019 General Election, the average amount spent by candidates on campaign was ₹70 lakh (Centre for Media Studies, 2020), which most women could not afford unless they were supported by an elite or a dynasty.

These barriers have already been reduced by political funding reforms and digital campaign tools. The programmes like MyNeta and ADR India have enhanced transparency and civil society scrutiny which in a way is an indirect positive influence on female candidates who place credibility and clean politics as a priority.

- **Caste, Class and Intersectionality**

The issues of caste and class are still important factors that can define the accessibility of political power by women. Women of Dalit and Adivasi are doubly discriminated, despite discrimination based not only on gender but also on social status (Guru, 2018). An example is that although there is a constitutional reservation of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, the representation of Dalit and tribal women in Parliament is low. The success of a few leaders like Phoolan Devi and Droupadi Murmu is a rare exception and proves that intersectional barriers can be overcome but not yet removed.

Political participation differences between the urban and rural are also shown through intersectionality. Women in the urban regions tend to access more education and networks and those in the rural areas extensively use collective institutions such as self-help groups and cooperatives to get into politics (Desai and Joshi, 2022). Such a variety of paths highlights the idea that the problem of feminine leadership in India cannot be examined with the help of some one-dimensional approach to gender but has to consider a range of intersections among various identities.

- **Legal Framework and Institutional Support**

Women have been enabled through legal provisions. The 73 rd and 74 th Amendments (1992) entrenched gender quotas in the local governance establishing a huge pool of women leaders. Having adopted the Women Reservation Bill (2023) once passed under the law will make the same model applicable to both national and state legislature. Furthermore, the government has strengthened its gender parity in leadership through such policies as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (2015) and National Policy on the Empowerment of Women (2016).

Such actions have to be supplemented with political training, mentorship and gender-sensitive electoral reforms. As the UNDP (2023) report states, participation is not powerless representation. Therefore, capacity-building programs will continue to play an important role in maintaining female leadership.

Gender Politics and Government

- **Gender-Sensitive Policy Priorities**

It has been found that women leaders in India have always been keen in policies on the social sector that focus on education, health and community welfare. According to empirical studies, female sarpanches will devote more funds to drinking water and sanitation projects as opposed to male sarpanches (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). On the same note, the women leaders in the state level have implemented revolutionary welfare programs.

As an example, Kanyashree Prakalpa in West Bengal by Mamata Banerjee (2013) has already helped more than 7 million girls, ensuring access to education and postponing their marriage (Chatterjee, 2021). In Tamil Nadu, Amma Canteens by Jayalalithaa (2013) made affordable access to food institutionalized to the urban poor and has earned worldwide acclaim in the field of welfare as gender-responsive. These policies bring out the ways in which feminine leadership tends to translate compassion to developmental realities.

Besides, Self-Help Group (SHG) movement, established through the National Rural Livelihood Mission, has owed a good part of its success to women in the local governance who enabled the economic collectives to the rural women. Feminine leadership therefore has multiplier effects, not just to the gender representation, but also social justice indicators.

- **Community participation and Governance**

Women leadership often focuses on participatory leadership and not hierarchical management. Women leaders are more apt to use an inclusive strategy, holding open meetings, promoting community discussion and incorporating the marginalized voices in the process of local planning (Buch, 2000). This participatory paradigm is the same as the idea of development as freedom offered by Amartya Sen (1999), in which the empowerment is based on the ability to engage in decision-making.

At the national scale, female members of parliament like Supriya Sule, Priyanka Chaturvedi and Kanimozhi Karunanidhi have actively been engaged in parliamentary formations on social justice, environment and education fields that traditionally went unnoticed in male dominated politics. This kind of involvement indicates that gender diversity in leadership increases the policy agenda and democratizes governance.

- **Remaking the Political Culture**

    The influx of women in great numbers has started to disrupt the masculinized Indian politics. Employing qualities that are commonly referred to as feminine, including empathy, collaboration and moral accountability, are all qualities that are being more appreciated in the governance discourses (Eagly and Carli, 2018). There is also the symbolic visibility of women in a position of authority which has changed the perceptions of the populace.

    Beaman et al. (2012) also established that the availability of a female sarpanch enhanced the parental level of desire in educating their daughters by a quarter and minimized gender discrimination during household decision-making. In this way, the feminine leadership creates a long-term cultural capital that is not dependent on the election period.

Recommendations

- The 2023 Bill needs to be put in action as fast as possible, with mechanisms to be employed to proportionately represent Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes among the reserved seats.

- Establish national and state-based training academies that train women leaders, primarily in political communication, financial literacy and digital campaigning to enhance post-reservation competence.

- Required internal quotas of gender in party leadership and candidate selection committees to provide electoral quotas of longer duration.

- Increase the exposure of political funding to women via state-sponsored grants and micro-donations and open monitoring of election spending in order to deal with financial bias.

- Introduce gender budgeting into institutions to render an assessment of the gender effect of government expenditures and promote responsibility.

- Encourage mentorship between older women politicians and younger leaders who are at the grassroot level so as to close the experience gap among women in leadership positions and making them more united.

- Implement more stringent gender based political violence and harassment, which discourages women participation.

- Encourage female leaders to be digital so that they can have increased political visibility and participation by citizens in the age of e-governance.

Conclusion

    The path that the grassroots take to the Lok Sabha is a defining transitional story of feminine leadership in India, which is founded on steadfastness, inclusion and moral daring. Although constitutional amendments and affirmative policies have provided the groundwork to the equality of gender, what is clear is the actual transformation comes through the lived experiences of women who have overcome structural inequalities to occupy the political space. Indian women have transformed the concept of leadership in the ways of the charismatic power of Indira Gandhi, the moral representation by Droupadi Murmu, rural innovation by Chhavi Rajawat and populist welfare rule by Mamata Banerjee. Their joint experiences show that the feminine leadership is not a deviant form in mainstream politics but a moral correction

of mainstream politics.With India entering a new stage of democratic maturing, the challenge is not only to have more women in the political arena but also to entrench a culture that appreciates the feminine ideals of governing the country empathy, cooperation and justice. The fact that women surfaced out of the grassroot to the national platform is not only a sign of political inclusion but also the redefinition of democracy itself, more inclusive, caring and fair.

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