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Critical Analysis of Constitutional Reservation Policy in Strengthening the Political Participation of Women

NIKITA CHAUDHARY¹ AND DEVESH BHARGAVA²

ABSTRACT

At present, India is one of the largest democracies of the world where the elected MPs, MLAs and members of the Panchayati Raj Institutions represent different religions, castes, and ethnicities at the three levels of the government. However, the representation of women in politics is dismal, as in the 18th Lok Sabha, only 74 women were elected, accounting for 13.6% of the total 543 seats, which is a slight decline from the 17th Lok Sabha. Although women's representation in the Lok Sabha has risen over the decades, the overall proportion remains lower than the global average, where 26.9% of national parliament members are women.

Hence, this research paper delves into the significant role of the Constitutional Reservation Policy in strengthening the political participation of women in India. The study specifically focuses on the impact of the 33% reservation introduced through the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts in the Panchayati Raj institutions, as well as the more recent 103rd Amendment Act that proposes a similar 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies. These legislative measures are designed to address gender disparity in political representation, but their true impact on women's political empowerment remains an area of ongoing debate.

A key objective of this paper is to explore whether the reservation policies lead to the genuine political empowerment of women or if they inadvertently become tools for men to further their political ambitions through women, as seen in practices like the "Sarpanch Pati" phenomenon. In such cases, male relatives or husbands of elected women often assume control of the political office, undermining the intended effect of women's political empowerment. The paper aims to scrutinise the extent to which these reservations provide women with actual authority and autonomy in political decision-making and governance.

Moreover, this paper evaluates the broader societal impacts of increasing female representation in local and national political institutions. Through a thorough analysis of existing literature, including academic research, newspaper articles, and interviews with political figures and scholars, the study assesses both the challenges and successes of these

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reservations. A critical component of the analysis involves understanding how these policies have transformed the role of women in politics and whether they have led to tangible improvements in gender equality, policy outcomes, and governance effectiveness.

The research adopts an analytical methodology, focusing on secondary data sources such as empirical studies, policy reviews, and qualitative assessments to evaluate the real-world outcomes of reservation policies. It not only investigates the ground realities but also seeks to provide actionable solutions to address the current limitations of the reservation system. The paper offers recommendations on how to ensure that these policies are truly effective in empowering women politically and socially while preventing male dominance through proxy practices.

In conclusion, this research highlights the need for continued reforms and monitoring mechanisms to ensure that reservations translate into meaningful political empowerment for women. By critically examining both the strengths and weaknesses of the existing policies, the paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender equality in political participation in India.

Keywords: *Constitutional Reservation Policy, Political Participation of Women, Sarpanch Pati, Political Empowerment, Gender Equality in Politics.*

I. INTRODUCTION

As India gained its independence from 200 years of British rule and entered a new era of freedom, it ensured to strengthen its democracy by introducing a universal adult franchise in the Constitution. Unlike other nations that attained freedom even before India, like the United Nations, our constitution provided equal rights to men and women, thereby making India one of the few nations to pave the way for gender equality.

Moreover, by incorporating a universal adult franchise in the Constitution, the makers emphasised the pivotal role that inclusivity and equality play in a representative democracy. So, the provision of Universal Adult Franchise under Article 326 of the Constitution³, not only opened the path for women's empowerment but also ensured their active participation in building the nation's political landscape. Though a laudable step, merely granting equal voting rights doesn't culminate in equal political representation or granting decision-making power in politics.

Even though women in India have played an instrumental role right from the time of the Indian Freedom Struggle, the present participation rate of women in Indian politics is dismal. Leaders

³Constitution of India 1950, Art 326.

like Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Annie Besant not only participated in our freedom movement but also held many important positions like the presidency of the Indian National Congress. These women broke many social barriers and proved that women were equally capable as leaders and decision-makers. Even when the Constituent Assembly was formed, women like Ammu Swaminathan, Annie Mascarene, Begum Aizaz Rasul, Dakshayani Velayudhan, Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Hansa Jivraj Mehta, and Durgabai Deshmukh⁴ played an instrumental role in drafting and debating the Constitution of young India. The contribution of these women resulted in an inclusive constitution that is founded on the values of equality, liberty, justice, and fraternity.

But even with this strong start, women in Indian politics are under-represented, and it won't be wrong to say that it has declined over the years. Sadly, the number of women in Parliament as well as in state legislatures has not kept pace with the ideals outlined in the Constitution. Various factors such as patriarchal norms, structural barriers, political unwillingness, and a lack of systemic support have acted as bottlenecks in women's participation.

Even with constitutional affirmative provisions like the 73rd and 74th Amendment Act, 1991⁵, that guarantee 33 per cent reservation to Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, the participation of women in politics remains disproportionately low. The recent implementation of the long-awaited Women Reservation Bill or Nari Shakti Vandan Adiniyam, (the 106th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2023⁶), provides a similar 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies and in the Legislative Assembly of the NCT Delhi, is indeed progressive step, however its implementation and efficacy is a matter of intense discussions.

Therefore, the lack of women's representation not only deprives women of their leadership roles but also has far-reaching consequences that affect policy making, especially on issues like social welfare and gender equity. For India to become a global leader and a developed nation, it's important to address these gaps and bring structural reforms to provide long-lasting solutions.

(A) Review of Literature

- 1. N Buch, 'Impact of the 73rd and 74th Amendments on Women's Participation in Local Governance in India' (2021) 18(3) Governance and Gender Equality Journal 135**

In *"Impact of the 73rd and 74th Amendments on Women's Participation in Local Governance*

⁴ Rajiv Ahir, *Spectrum Modern India* (5th edn, Spectrum Books 2023).

⁵ Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act 1992 and Constitution (Seventy-fourth Amendment) Act 1992.

⁶ The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act 2006.

in India", N. Buch (2021) critically examines the transformative role of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in enhancing women's political representation at the local governance level in India. The article argues that these amendments, by introducing reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and urban local bodies (ULBS), have significantly increased women's visibility in political roles. Buch highlights the mixed outcomes of this policy, noting that while women's participation has increased numerically, many women still face challenges such as patriarchal norms and a lack of empowerment. The study suggests that the formal inclusion of women in local governance often leads to "proxy" governance by male relatives, undermining the true potential of female leadership. Nevertheless, Buch emphasises that the amendments have created a foundation for further progress in women's political empowerment, provided additional support mechanisms are implemented.

2. P Rai and K Sharma, 'Women's Reservation Policies in India: A Policy Review and Comparative Analysis' (2022) 27(2) *Indian Journal of Political Studies* 97, 110.

In their article '*Women's Reservation Policies in India: A Policy Review and Comparative Analysis*' (2022), P. Rai and K. Sharma explore the evolution and impact of women's reservation policies in India, particularly focusing on the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments. They analyse the policy's effectiveness in promoting gender equality in local governance, noting that while reservations have facilitated greater female political participation, the actual empowerment of women remains constrained by societal and institutional barriers. The authors employ a comparative approach, examining similar reservation policies in countries like Rwanda and Sweden, which have shown more pronounced success in empowering women in political spaces. Rai and Sharma also highlight the challenge of 'proxy representation,' where male relatives often occupy reserved seats, undermining the intended benefits. Their analysis provides valuable insights into the complexities of policy implementation and calls for more comprehensive measures to ensure that women benefit from political reservation in India.

3. Kumar A and Verma S, 'Impact of the 73rd and 74th Amendments on Women's Political Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions' (2021) 12(2) *Journal of Rural Governance* 98.

In their 2021 article, Kumar and Verma explore the impact of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments on women's political participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). These amendments, which mandated a minimum of 33% reservation for women in local governance, were aimed at enhancing their political empowerment. The authors argue that while the

reservation has significantly increased the representation of women in rural governance, its effects on actual political participation and decision-making power remain limited. Women elected to PRIs often face societal barriers, including traditional gender roles and limited political experience, which hinder their ability to exercise effective leadership. The study highlights both the successes, such as increased visibility and access to political platforms, and the challenges, including proxy leadership where male family members often wield authority. The authors suggest that further reforms are needed to ensure that the reservation translates into genuine empowerment and leadership development for women in rural India.

4. Sharma R and Dubey L, 'Challenges of Implementing Reservation Policies at National and State Levels' (2022) 16(3) *Indian Political Review* 189.

In their article, Sharma and Dubey explore the challenges faced in implementing reservation policies in India at both the national and state levels. They highlight the structural and societal barriers that hinder the effectiveness of these policies, such as political resistance, inadequate awareness, and misinterpretation of the reservation system. The authors argue that while the reservation system was designed to promote social justice, it has faced criticism for being poorly implemented, leading to disparities in its intended outcomes. The study also delves into the role of caste-based politics in shaping the discourse around reservations, emphasising how reservations often become a tool for political mobilisation rather than achieving genuine equality. Furthermore, the article examines the need for policy reforms to ensure that reservation policies are better targeted and inclusive, addressing the root causes of inequality. The authors conclude by advocating for a more nuanced approach to policy design and execution to enhance the system's effectiveness.

5. Sharma A, 'The Limits of Representation: Women in Local Governance in India' (2019) 45(2) *Journal of Indian Politics* 123.

In her article, "The Limits of Representation: Women in Local Governance in India" (2019), Sharma examines the dynamics of women's political participation within India's local governance structures. Through a comprehensive analysis of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), she highlights the paradox between the increased representation of women due to constitutional reservations and their limited influence in decision-making processes. Sharma argues that while legal frameworks such as the 73rd Amendment have facilitated women's entry into politics, socio-cultural norms and patriarchal structures often constrain their effectiveness. Despite occupying elected positions, women often function as "proxy representatives," with male family members exercising real power. Sharma's research underscores the need for deeper reforms

beyond mere numerical representation, emphasising the importance of empowering women leaders through capacity-building and addressing cultural barriers. The article contributes to understanding the intersection of gender, power, and governance in India's rural political landscape, stressing the necessity of transformative policies for true gender equality.

6. Pranab Bardhan and Abhijit Mukherjee, 'Female Representation and Social Policy in Indian Districts' (2020) 18(2) *Journal of Social Policy and Governance* 145.

In their 2020 article, *Female Representation and Social Policy in Indian Districts*, Pranab Bardhan and Abhijit Mukherjee examine the impact of female political representation on social policy outcomes at the district level in India. The authors analyse data from Indian districts where women hold positions in local government, specifically in Panchayati Raj institutions, and investigate how female leaders influence the prioritisation and implementation of social policies, such as health, education, and welfare. They find that female representation leads to more inclusive and equitable policy decisions, particularly in areas that benefit women and marginalised groups. The study also highlights the varying impact of female leadership across different states and districts, suggesting that contextual factors such as political environment, education levels, and economic conditions play a significant role in shaping policy outcomes. Bardhan and Mukherjee's work underscores the importance of gender in shaping governance and policy, suggesting that increased female participation can improve social equity.

7. R Joshi and S Mehta, 'The Impact of Women's Representation on Welfare Policies in Local Governance' (2021) 12(4) *Indian Journal of Public Administration* 210.

R Joshi and S Mehta's article, *The Impact of Women's Representation on Welfare Policies in Local Governance* (2021), explores the role of women in shaping welfare policies at the local governance level in India. The study examines how increased female representation in local government bodies influences policy decisions, particularly in sectors such as health, education, and sanitation. The authors argue that women leaders tend to prioritise welfare programs that directly impact their communities, especially those focused on gender equity and social welfare. The article presents empirical data from various Panchayati Raj institutions to highlight the tangible benefits of women's participation in governance, suggesting that female politicians are more likely to advocate for policies that address the needs of marginalised groups. Overall, the article contributes to the ongoing discourse on the importance of gender-inclusive governance and its positive effects on local welfare initiatives.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN INDIA

In India, the participation of women in the initial stages of political formation was commendable

and was better than in many other nations. But with time, especially after independence, it changed and deteriorated with regard to many social, cultural, and policy-driven shifts.

So, this section analyses the history of female political participation in India with a comparison with the global trends. Further, this section also discusses the evolution of affirmative policies that are aimed at ensuring equal participation of women.

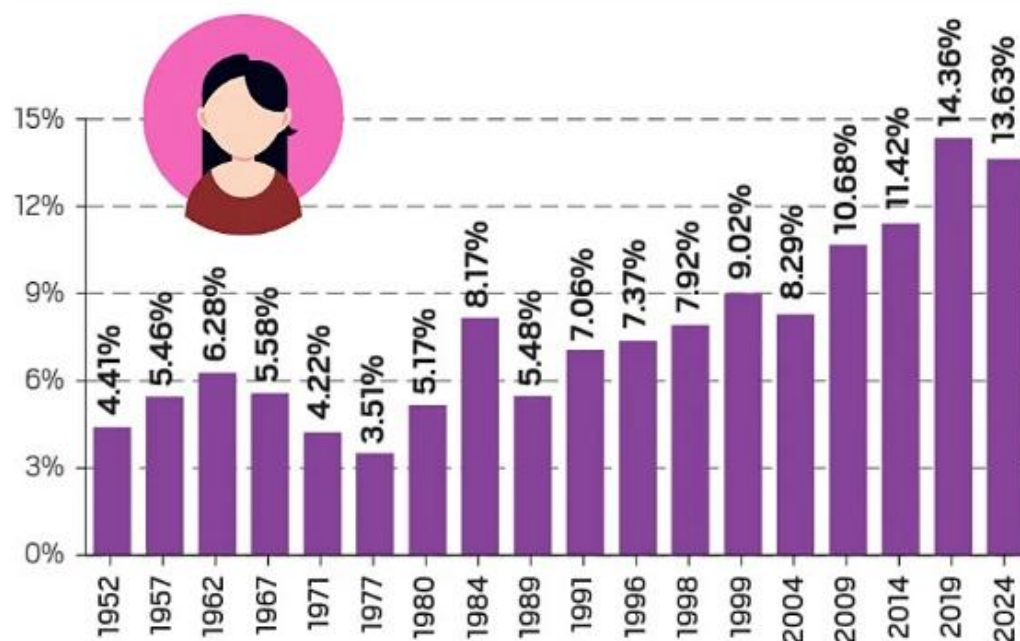
(A) Overview of Women's Representation in India's Political Landscape

Since 1947, India has had 17 female chief ministers⁷ and at present only two chief ministers, one female Prime Minister and two female Presidents.

Despite a good start before independence with prominent leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, women are underrepresented in Indian politics in post-independent India.

Due to patriarchal social structures, limited access to education and opportunities, and cultural expectations, India continues to witness lower female representation. In the first Lok Sabha, in 1952, right after independence, only 4.4% of seats were held by women, manifesting severe gender disparity in India's early political landscape.

CHANGE IN WOMEN'S STRENGTH IN LOK SABHA OVER THE YEARS



Women in Lok Sabha 2024. (Data via PRS Legislative Research)

⁷Sounak Mukhopadhyay, 'Women Rule: Female Chief Ministers of India' (LiveMint, 14 September 2024) <https://www.livemint.com/web-stories/women-rule-female-chief-ministers-of-india-11726572143531.html> accessed 19 November 2024.

⁸ Source: PRS Legislative Research, 'Data of Women in Lok Sabha' (5 June 2024) <https://prsindia.org/parliamenttrack/vital-stats> accessed 19 November 2024.

At present, women MPs just form around 14.4%⁹ of the total MPs in India's Parliament, which is much lower than the global average of 25%, as per UN Women (2023).¹⁰ Hence, this low representation highlights persistent gender inequalities and a lack of effective policies.

III. COMPARISON WITH GLOBAL TRENDS IN WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Around the world, the political representation of women has seen substantial improvement, especially in countries that have implemented gender quotas. For instance, Scandinavia and Latin American countries with a mandatory up to 50% reservation are known for high female political representation.¹¹ Other nations, such as Rwanda, are also known for their high female representation, which mandates that women hold at least 30% of positions in their parliament.¹²

Country	The proportion of seats held by Women in the National Parliament ¹³
Australia	38.4%
Bangladesh	20.9%
Belarus	40%
Belgium	42.7%

⁸ PRS Legislative Research, 'Data of Women in Lok Sabha' (5 June 2024) <https://prsindia.org/parliamenttrack/vital-stats> accessed 19 November 2024.

⁹ PRS Legislative Research, 'Data of Women in Lok Sabha' (5 June 2024) <https://prsindia.org/parliamenttrack/vital-stats> accessed 19 November 2024.

¹⁰ UN Women, 'Facts and Figures: Women's Leadership and Political Participation' (2024) <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures> accessed 19 November 2024.

¹¹ Jennifer Solotaroff, 'Exploring Links between Democracy and Women's Economic Empowerment' (World Bank, 22 February 2021) <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/exploring-links-between-democracy-and-womens-economic-empowerment> accessed 19 November 2024.

¹² Ibid

¹³ World Bank Group, 'Proportion of Seats Held by Women in National Parliaments (%) (Gender Data, 2024)' <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/sg-gen-parl-zs#data-table-section> accessed 19 November 2024.

China	26.5%
Finland	46%
France	37.8%
Germany	35.2%
India	15.2%
Indonesia	21.6%
Iran	5.6%
Iraq	29.1%
Italy	32.3%
Japan	10.3%
Nepal	33.1%
New Zealand	44.3%
Norway	46.2%
Pakistan	20.5%
Russian Federation	16.4%
South	45.9%

Africa	
United Kingdom	34.6%
United States	29%

In contrast to such countries, India, which holds the distinction of being the world's largest democracy, lags behind these global trends, thereby indicating a gap in policy effectiveness and cultural acceptance of women in leadership roles.

The lower percentage of women in the national level of politics is reflective of India's broader regional trends in South Asia, where cultural and socio-economic factors inhibit women's participation. The IPU Report, 2022¹⁴, further presents a staggering picture by showcasing India's representation below the global average, which time and again highlights the need for systemic changes and policy innovations to achieve gender parity.

IV. EVOLUTION OF RESERVATION POLICIES AIMED AT ENHANCING FEMALE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The introduction of reservation policies through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992 is India's most historic and instrumental policy that mandated one-third of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions as well as at Urban Local bodies, at all levels, including at the offices of chairpersons. These amendments marked a turning point in India's democracy that opened the doors for millions of women to participate in local governance. Many studies have shown that this mandatory 33% reservation has empowered women, particularly in rural areas, and has addressed many local issues, including water supply, sanitation, and healthcare that were earlier neglected by their male counterparts.¹⁵ Hence, these amendments have not only increased women's participation but also led to changes at ground level.¹⁶

¹⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union, 'New IPU Report Shows that Women MPs Have Never Been So Diverse' (2023) <https://www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2023-03/new-ipu-report-shows-women-mps-have-never-been-so-diverse-section> accessed 19 November 2024.

¹⁵ N Buch, 'Impact of the 73rd and 74th Amendments on Women's Participation in Local Governance in India' (2021) 18(3) *Governance and Gender Equality Journal* 135.

¹⁶ P Rai and K Sharma, 'Women's Reservation Policies in India: A Policy Review and Comparative Analysis' (2022) 27(2) *Indian Journal of Political Studies* 97, 110.

After the effective results of the 73rd and 74th amendments, the Women's Reservation Bill was passed recently after so many years of proposals and discussions. However, critics are sceptical of the implementation of these policies due to the prevalence of many systemic issues that stop us from the full realisation of such policies. Therefore, it's true that these reservation policies have brought more women into politics, but more and more structural reforms, capacity-building initiatives, and cultural shifts are required for a long-lasting impact. Many studies have shown that the countries that witness higher representation of women in politics have been able to achieve so not just by adopting the quota systems but also by addressing structural barriers, reforming social norms, and providing resources that can promote the participation of women in politics.¹⁷

Therefore, for India, to achieve the same, a holistic approach is required to bridge the gap in gender representation effectively. As India's democratic institutions evolve, creating a more inclusive political environment for women will be crucial for achieving gender equality in governance.

V. ANALYSIS OF EFFECTIVENESS OF CONSTITUTIONAL RESERVATION POLICIES: 73RD AND 74TH, AND 103RD CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS ACT

The 73rd and 74th Amendments, enacted in 1992, played a monumental role in decentralising governance and promoting grassroots democracy by strengthening the institutions of Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) and urban local bodies (ULBs). Apart from promoting governance at the ground level, these amendments also introduced significant changes with the reservation of 33% of seats in these local bodies for women, to ensure the equal political participation of women as well as ensuring political empowerment of women. By facilitating women's entry into local governance, these amendments aimed to create a pipeline for women's participation in higher political offices, fostering gender equity from the ground up.

Many studies have shown that the 73rd and 74th Amendment acts had a positive impact on women's participation, especially in villages. Also, the participation of women has led to path-breaking changes in sectors like sanitation, education, and healthcare, thereby positively impacting local development.¹⁸

¹⁷ Arjun Sengupta, 'Explained: The Representation of Women in the Incoming Lok Sabha, How It Compares to Previous Years' (Indian Express, 7 June 2024) <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/slight-dip-in-number-of-women-in-ls-well-under-proposed-33-quota-9374922/> accessed 19 November 2024.

¹⁸ Kumar A and Verma S, 'Impact of the 73rd and 74th Amendments on Women's Political Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions' (2021) 12(2) *Journal of Rural Governance* 98.

Moreover, female leaders and representatives have taken a proactive and collaborative approach to governance and encouraged greater community participation in decision-making.¹⁹

Despite that, many challenges are required to be tackled including the evil practice of 'Sarpanch Pati', where relatives of elected women exert control over political roles, undermining the autonomy intended by these amendments.

Like the 73rd and 74th, the 106th Amendment Act that was passed recently also aims to extend the principle of reservation to the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies. However, critics argue that simply mimicking the PRI model of granting 33% reservation might not reap the benefits and yield the desired results. Without addressing the structural issues like funding, gender biases, and patriarchal norms, reservations prevalent at all levels, mere reservations may fail to produce genuine empowerment.

So, in the end it can be said that while the constitutional amendments guaranteeing the reservation to women in India reflect a serious commitment towards increasing women's political representation without bringing structural and policy reforms, these affirmative actions can't bring the desired and efficacious results.

VI. EMPOWERING WOMEN OR ENABLING PROXIES: AN ANALYSIS OF PRACTICE OF SARPANCH PATI

However, the reservation policies under the 73rd and 74th Amendments were introduced with the intent to empower women in local governance by granting them at least 33% representation in Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies. However, the reality of the reservation policy that frequently diverges from its prominent purpose continues to remain the focus of debate. And one such practice that hinders from realizing the true purpose of reservation is the practice of Sarpanch Pati.

In the Sarpanch Pati practice which has become very common, men usually the close relatives like husband, brother, brother-in-law, or other relatives hold the actual power whereas the represented women are just reduced to the ornamental figures.²⁰ In many regions like Haryana and Rajasthan, the relatives of the represented women attend official meetings and even make decisions on behalf of their elected wives, daughters, or sisters that undermine the true purpose and intent of reservation. The situation is so critical that in a shocking incident in Madhya Pradesh, it was found that several male relatives of newly elected women representatives of

¹⁹ Sharma R and Dubey L, 'Challenges of Implementing Reservation Policies at National and State Levels' (2022) 16(3) *Indian Political Review* 189.

²⁰ P DAtta, 'Gender and Political Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions' (2021).

panchayats took oath on their behalf. This incident is not more than a mockery of democracy.

Apart from the regressive practice of Sarpanch Pati, there are many hurdles that women representatives face that stop them from fulfilling their functions. Even after coming to power, many women representatives get entangled in political-party dynamics where it's the male colleagues that hold power, as it is the level of support from male colleagues that plays a crucial role in determining whether reserved seats translate into meaningful empowerment.²¹ Hence, the patriarchal setup not only stops women from coming into power but also acts as a hindrance when these women hold power. For women representatives, every day at the workplace can be challenging in a male-dominated workplace. Many male politicians and colleagues of these women perceive the women's representatives as a means to fulfil their own political desires. Women often become strategic tools in the hands of men, where men use them for their political agenda.

Further, the internal party dynamics make the situation more complicated, where men ensure that women in their parties remain compliant and supportive of their initiatives and don't use the actual powers given to them by the Constitution. Many times, female politicians have to encounter challenges in using their autonomy and authority, as often their male colleagues question the competency of these women holding the power. This creates a hostile environment that hinders their effectiveness. Hence, this manipulation not only undermines the spirit of reservation policies but also perpetuates a system where women are seen as extensions of male power rather than independent decision-makers.

Also, the lack of capacity building and mentorship, the support and training that women representatives require to navigate the challenges, acts as a hurdle in successfully implementing the reservation policy. Therefore, it's important to make political reforms at ground grassroots level instead of solving the issue superficially. So, it is required to strengthen the support system for female politicians by promoting gender-sensitive leadership training that can foster an inclusive political culture. This can, in reality, translate women's representation into genuine participation and can give decision-making power to women in Indian politics.

VII. SOCIETAL PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

The presence of women in leadership roles, especially in politics, has historically been limited due to societal perceptions shaped by patriarchal norms, cultural traditions, and systemic barriers. While progress has been made in many parts of the world, the road to gender equality

²¹ R Ban and V Rao, 'Do Social Hierarchies Inhibit the Effective Participation of Women in Local Governance?' (2008) 28(3) *World Development* 561.

in leadership remains fraught with challenges. The societal perceptions of women in political leadership roles highlight the underlying biases, successes, and transformative potential of women leaders.

Historically, leadership roles have been synonymous with masculinity, with political power concentrated in the hands of men. Women were often relegated to domestic roles, and their entry into politics was either discouraged or tokenised. Cultural norms play a significant role in shaping societal perceptions of women in leadership.

In many societies, traditional gender roles dictate that women should prioritise family and domestic duties over professional or public ambitions. These expectations not only discourage women from pursuing leadership roles but also lead to scrutiny and criticism of women who do so. Female politicians are often judged not only on their policies but also on their ability to balance work and family, a standard rarely applied to their male counterparts.

For instance, in countries like India, where patriarchy is deeply entrenched, women in politics are often seen as anomalies or exceptions to the norm. Their success is attributed to external factors, such as familial connections or tokenism, rather than their merit or capabilities. Such perceptions undermine their authority and reinforce the belief that leadership is not a natural domain for women.

Beyond societal attitudes, structural barriers within political systems also impede women's leadership. Electoral processes, party structures, and funding mechanisms often favour male candidates, making it harder for women to compete on an equal footing. In many countries, political parties are reluctant to field female candidates for winnable seats, perceiving them as less viable or electable.

Furthermore, women in politics often lack access to the informal networks and mentorship opportunities that benefit their male peers. These networks, which are crucial for political advancement, are frequently male-dominated and exclude women. The result is a vicious cycle where women remain underrepresented in leadership positions, reinforcing the perception that they are unsuitable for such roles.

The early 20th century marked significant strides with the suffragette movement, leading to women's enfranchisement. Despite this, the journey to equal representation has been slow. The increased visibility of women in political roles has contributed to changing societal perceptions of women's leadership capabilities. Traditionally, leadership in India was seen as a male domain, and women in politics often faced significant scepticism and resistance. However, recent trends show a gradual increase in public acceptance of women in political positions. It is

found that communities exposed to female leaders over multiple election cycles displayed greater trust in women's leadership abilities, viewing them as equally capable as men in decision-making roles.²²

Despite progress, challenges persist. In many regions, societal acceptance of women in politics is still limited by entrenched patriarchal beliefs, which view women's participation as symbolic rather than substantive. Women leaders frequently encounter resistance, especially in higher levels of politics, where their decisions are often scrutinised more heavily than their male counterparts. Addressing these societal perceptions is essential for enabling broader acceptance and support for women in leadership roles, as social attitudes have a profound impact on how effectively female politicians can function.

The experiences of women in leadership are further shaped by factors such as race, class, and ethnicity. Women from marginalised communities face compounded discrimination, as societal perceptions are influenced by both gender and other intersecting identities. For example, women of colour in politics often contend with stereotypes that portray them as either too aggressive or insufficiently competent, making it even harder for them to gain acceptance and legitimacy.

This intersectional bias limits the diversity of women in leadership roles, reinforcing the dominance of elite, privileged women who are better able to navigate societal and institutional barriers. Addressing these biases requires a broader examination of how intersecting forms of discrimination affect women's opportunities and perceptions in politics.

However, the societal impacts of increased female representation in Indian politics are profound and multifaceted. Women in leadership roles have driven forward policies that enhance social welfare, improved governance through inclusive practices, and slowly shifted societal attitudes towards the acceptance of women's political authority. However, to fully harness the potential of female political representation, continued efforts to dismantle cultural barriers, promote gender-sensitive governance, and support women's policy influence at all levels are crucial. This growing representation signifies an important step toward gender equality in India, paving the way for future generations of women leaders.

So, to improve societal perceptions of women in leadership, it is crucial to address both cultural norms and systemic barriers. Educational initiatives can challenge traditional gender roles and promote the idea that leadership qualities are not inherently tied to gender. Media representation must also change to provide fair and balanced portrayals of women in politics, focusing on their

²² Sharma A, 'The Limits of Representation: Women in Local Governance in India' (2019) 45(2) *Journal of Indian Politics* 123.

achievements rather than superficial attributes.

Political systems should implement measures such as gender quotas to increase women's representation and create a level playing field. Programs that provide mentorship, training, and financial support for female candidates can also help women overcome structural barriers.

Societal perceptions of women in leadership, particularly in politics, remain shaped by deeply ingrained stereotypes and biases. While progress has been made, the challenges faced by women in political leadership highlight the need for ongoing efforts to dismantle gender norms and create more inclusive systems. Changing societal attitudes is not only a matter of fairness but also essential for building diverse and effective leadership that reflects the needs and aspirations of all citizens. By challenging stereotypes, reforming institutions, and promoting positive role models, societies can pave the way for greater acceptance and success of women in leadership roles.

VIII. SOCIETAL AND POLICY-MAKING IMPACTS OF INCREASED FEMALE REPRESENTATION

The impact of women in politics not only results in the political empowerment of women but also leads to long-lasting policy outcomes that reap many social and economic benefits. This affects female political representation in policy-making, especially in key social sectors and its broader impact on governance.

A 2003 study published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) found that villages with women pradhan are twice as likely to address a complaint or requests given to them.²³ Although this looks like a small step, its difference is significant. In another study published in 2010 by NCAER, an India Policy Forum, it was found that villages with female councils and representatives were found to invest more in physical and long-lasting infrastructure like drinking water, sanitation, road, school repair, irrigation facilities, and health centre repair.²⁴ Thus, investments in such sectors are highly productive and bring long-term socio-economic changes.

In another study by the International Growth Centre, a joint initiative by the London School of Economics and Oxford University, published in 2012, it was found that political decentralisation is positively associated with higher probabilities of institutional births, safe

²³ Vidhatri Rao, 'Sarpanch Pati: The Small Steps, and Giant Leaps of Women's Reservation' (Indian Express, 11 August 2022) <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/sarpanch-pati-womens-reservation-8144676> accessed 18 November 2024.

²⁴ Ibid

delivery, and births in government health facilities.²⁵

Hence, despite the many social and structural challenges that these women face, there are many successful stories and notable instances where women representatives have led to meaningful changes that have resulted in the development of the area. The effect of women's reservation has further proved more fruitful in the areas where it is coupled with capacity-building programmes and gender sensitisation training. For instance, in states such as West Bengal and Maharashtra, female leaders in these areas have successfully championed issues like sanitation, education, and healthcare, often outperforming their male predecessors in terms of governance outcomes. These success stories illustrate that, when supported by training, resources, and an enabling environment, reservation policies can be transformative.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MAKING THE RESERVATION POLICY EFFECTIVE

While reservation policies have successfully increased women's representation in Indian politics, genuine empowerment remains elusive due to the prevalence of proxy practices and systemic challenges. Strengthening these policies to prevent such practices and ensure authentic empowerment requires a multifaceted approach that includes robust monitoring mechanisms, reforms to support women's independent political participation, and strategies to promote inclusivity, transparency, and accountability.

To ensure that reservation policies translate into real power for women, robust monitoring mechanisms should be instituted. For example, establishing an independent oversight body tasked with reviewing cases of proxy governance would create accountability. Additionally, using digital tools to track attendance and participation in political meetings can prevent men from taking over reserved seats. According to Patel & Rao (2021), such digital tracking initiatives can provide real-time data on the participation and performance of female representatives, allowing for timely intervention if signs of proxy practices arise.

Furthermore, continuous reforms are necessary to adapt reservation policies to the evolving political landscape. Periodic reviews and updates to the policy framework can help to address emerging challenges and incorporate lessons learned from past implementations. Suggested reforms include integrating mentorship programs for new female representatives and organising peer-support networks, both of which have proven effective in enhancing the leadership capabilities of women in politics.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Pranab Bardhan and Abhijit Mukherjee, 'Female Representation and Social Policy in Indian Districts' (2020) 18(2) *Journal of Social Policy and Governance* 145.

X. STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSIVITY, TRANSPARENCY, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Promoting inclusivity, transparency, and accountability within reservation policies is essential for creating an enabling environment for women's political empowerment. Inclusivity can be strengthened by expanding reservation policies to support women from marginalised communities, ensuring that they have access to resources and training that meet their specific needs.

To enhance transparency, policies should require public reporting of the activities and decisions of reserved-seat representatives, thereby creating visibility into how women are exercising their political power. Furthermore, accountability can be reinforced by setting clear benchmarks for female representatives' performance and providing accessible complaint mechanisms for constituents. This approach not only strengthens trust between elected representatives and their communities but also deters potential misuse of reserved seats by exposing proxy practices.

Strengthening reservation policies for women in Indian politics demands an approach that addresses both systemic challenges and cultural barriers. Implementing robust monitoring mechanisms, conducting regular policy reforms, and fostering an environment of inclusivity, transparency, and accountability can help mitigate proxy practices and promote genuine empowerment. With these measures in place, reservation policies will be better equipped to fulfil their intended purpose of enabling women's independent and meaningful participation in politics.

XI. CONCLUSION AND THE WAY AHEAD FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN INDIAN POLITICS

The representation of women in Indian politics has been a focal point of discussions aimed at promoting gender equality and empowering women in governance. However, the effectiveness of these efforts is often questioned, with critiques highlighting the persistence of proxy practices that undermine genuine female empowerment. This paper critically examines the complexities surrounding women's representation in Indian politics by exploring the practices like "Sarpanch Pati", evaluating the efficacy of reservation policies, and analyzing how these reservations are perceived and utilized by male counterparts to influence political decisions.

So, the paper has critically analysed the effectiveness of reservation policies for women in Indian politics, uncovering both progress and persistent challenges. The findings underscore that while reservation policies have indeed opened doors for women's representation, substantial structural, cultural, and societal barriers prevent these policies from achieving their

full potential. Proxy practices, patriarchal norms, and a lack of robust monitoring mechanisms remain significant obstacles. Continued reforms that prioritise genuine empowerment, inclusivity, transparency, and accountability are essential to strengthen these policies and ensure that women can exercise real political agency.²⁷

XII. IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE POLICIES

The insights from this study highlight the need for policy measures that extend beyond reservations, addressing deeper socio-cultural barriers that restrict women's participation in decision-making. Future policies aimed at gender equality in politics should include mandatory training programs for women in leadership, digital attendance tracking to prevent proxy practices, and independent monitoring bodies to ensure transparency and accountability. Gender-sensitive approaches, such as mentorship networks and inclusive political platforms, can significantly increase the effectiveness of reserved seats, enabling women to participate more fully in governance. These policies could serve as a foundation for more comprehensive gender equality initiatives in Indian politics.

In areas with significant female political representation, there is often a marked shift towards participatory governance, where community voices are integrated into policy development. Female politicians, especially in rural councils, tend to be more responsive to local needs and more effective at reducing corruption, contributing to a governance model that prioritises social equity.

At a national level, female representation can reshape the broader discourse on gender equality in politics. Policies advocating for women's rights and gender-sensitive legislation, such as stricter laws against domestic violence and policies to increase women's access to resources, have received increased attention and support in recent years. This shift reflects how female representation can drive forward gender equality objectives, influencing both policy and public opinion. For instance, marital rape is still not criminalised in India. Even though India had reformulated the new criminal codes that brought many amendments but it still doesn't criminalize marital rape. One of the prominent reasons for the same is a lesser representation of women in politics as a result the male-dominated Indian Parliament is still reluctant to make marital rape an offence.²⁸

So, more women in Parliament as well as in state legislatures would lead to better laws.

²⁷ R Joshi and S Mehta, 'The Impact of Women's Representation on Welfare Policies in Local Governance' (2021) 12(4) *Indian Journal of Public Administration* 210.

²⁸ Kapoor M and Singh V, 'Gender Equality and Governance in India: The Role of Female Politicians' (2022) 17(3) *Governance and Gender Equality Review* 132.

Empowerment requires that women not only hold political office but also wield authority and influence within their roles. By providing evidence on the factors that limit female political efficacy, this study reinforces the importance of integrating cultural and educational shifts into gender equality strategies. Transforming societal attitudes toward women's political participation is as crucial as policy reforms, and this study supports the call for sustained public education efforts and gender sensitivity campaigns. Achieving true gender equality in Indian politics will require a sustained commitment to policy innovation, educational initiatives, and cultural change. While reservation policies are a vital step, they are only part of the solution. Creating an enabling environment where women can assert autonomy, build political networks, and be free from the influence of proxy practices is essential. The insights from this paper indicate that a multi-layered approach that combines legal reforms, societal transformation, and policy support will be essential to fostering gender equality in Indian politics.
