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Decentralisation and Political Participation of Women in India

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ABSTRACT

This paper endeavors to extend literature on decentralisation in a new direction by posing the question as to how far decentralisation can be helpful in augmenting women's political representation in the Indian context. Women constitute roughly half of the population in India, but they historically have been marginalised by the political process. There are theoretical reasons to believe that the institution of decentralisation may impact women's status, but this has not been tested empirically in a systematic way. This paper examines as to how decentralisation affects women's representation, reviewing how 1) decentralisation may 'automatically' produce women-responsive policies, or alternatively how 2) decentralisation augments women participation in politics, thereby culminating into women-responsive policies. While appraising the quantum of success of 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution which reserve one-third of seats in rural and urban local bodies, this paper examines the prospects of reservation of seats for women in provincial legislatures and the Central Parliament vis-à-vis the role of decentralisation.

Keywords: *Decentralisation, Political Participation, Representation, Women's Empowerment, Reservation.*

Decentralisation or what Litvack and Seddon call 'the assignment of fiscal, political, and administrative responsibilities to lower levels of

government' is a mechanism of institutional reform in many countries.¹ Prevalence of the mechanism of decentralisation in its multiple forms in so many countries has seemingly spurred many scholars to ascertain its economic and political implications. There is absence of consensual opinion in literature over the conditions essential for 'successful' decentralisation, and the projected effects of decentralisation. According to Litvack et al, the fiscal, political and administrative dimensions of decentralisation make it a very complex reform and its effects are "cross-cutting."³ In other words, decentralisation is purported to impact and depend on many social and political outcomes of interest. For instance, projected implications of decentralisation include better matching of public goods to local needs,⁴ the development of free markets,⁵ stifling of ethnic or religious conflicts,⁶ and promotion of civil society.⁷

In the past decades advanced industrialised and developing countries alike have moved toward more decentralised patterns of governance and decentralisation has attracted the interest of scholars from various disciplines. Quantitative research has mainly focused on fiscal decentralisation and explored whether decentralisation brings about the gains promised by theory by scholars like Wibbles,⁸ and Rodden.⁹ In addition, a growing body of literature addresses 'puzzle of decentralisation', that is, the question why central governments choose to give up power, as can be evidenced from the works of Escobar-Lemmon,¹⁰ Garman, Haggard & Willis,¹¹ -Garrett & Rodden,¹² and O'Neill.¹³ T.G. Falleti in his research has also dealt with the question how different sequences of decentralisation reforms affect the intergovernmental balance of power.¹⁴ In recent times have seen concepts of decentralisation having undergone rapid change. Until the early 1980s government and the state were generally perceived of interchangeably. Government was looked upon as the institutional embodiment of state sovereignty and as the dominant source of political and legal decisionmaking. Decentralisation was defined as the transfer of authority, responsibility, and resources—through deconcentration, delegation, or devolution—from the center to lower levels of administration.¹⁵

Decentralisation

Concept of decentralisation in recent decades has been instrumental in endowing it with increasingly more diverse and meanings, objectives, and forms.¹⁶ The first wave of thinking on decentralisation, which evolved in the decades of the 1970s and the 1980s, centered on deconcentrating hierarchical government structures and bureaucracies.¹⁷ The second phase of decentralisation, commencing in the mid-1980s, extended the concept to encompass political power sharing, democratisation, and market liberalisation, expanding the scope for

private sector in decision making. The process of decentralisation was looked upon, during the decade of the 1990s, as a way of opening up governance to wider public participation through organisations of civil society. According to Dennis Rondinelli, international aid agencies and civil society promoted decentralisation as an essential part of a "process approach" to development that depended primarily on self-help by local communities and local governments.¹⁸ Many countries embarked on the policy of decentralisation in order to speed up the pace of development, break bureaucratic bottlenecks arising from centralised government planning and management, and participate more effectively in a globalising economy. Rondinelli et al have opined that until the late 1980s many countries followed three primary forms of decentralisation: deconcentration, devolution, and delegation.¹⁹ Deconcentration sought to shift administrative responsibilities from central ministries and departments to regional and local administrative levels by establishing field offices of national departments and transferring some authority for decision-making to regional field staff. Devolution aimed to strengthen local governments by granting them the authority, responsibility, and resources to provide services and infrastructure, protect public health and safety, and formulate and implement local policies. Through delegation, national governments shifted management authority for specific functions to semi-autonomous or parastatal organisations and state enterprises, regional planning and area development agencies, and multi- and single-purpose public authorities.

In the immediate aftermath of the post-cold war period, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and other international development organisations prescribed decentralisation as part of the structural adjustments needed to restore markets, create or strengthen democracy, and promote good governance. Developing countries came under pressure to decentralise by political, ethnic, religious, and cultural groups seeking greater autonomy in decision making and stronger control over national resources. In much of Africa, calls for decentralisation emanated from tribal minorities and economically peripheral ethnic groups.²⁰

The inability of centralised government bureaucracies to deliver effective probably any type of service to local areas fueled the public discontent in many developing countries. David Osborne and Ted Gaebler in their book *Reinventing Government*, which influenced thinking in US and other countries during the 1990s, argued that national, state, and local government should be innovative, market oriented, decentralised, and focused on offering their "customers" the highest quality services.²¹ It was argued that governments should "steer rather than row" and oversee service provision rather than deliver it directly;

further, governments should encourage local groups to solve their own problems by deregulating and privatising those activities that could be carried out by the private sector or by civil society organisations more efficiently or effectively than by public agencies. This was the period when the process of globalisation was gaining ground in most of the countries with specific emphasis on economic liberalisation, decentralisation and privatisation. The emphasis came to be focused on making government mission-driven rather than rule-bound, result oriented, enterprising, anticipatory, and customer driven. Government agencies should meet the needs of citizens rather than those of the bureaucracy. At the heart of this approach, was the notion that it had to be decentralised in order to achieve all the other goals; that is, it would be most effective working through participation and teamwork among government agencies at different levels and with groups outside of government. This leads us to briefly review relationship between globalisation and decentralisation.

Globalisation and Decentralisation

Undoubtedly globalisation has shaped and will continue to shape economic, political, and social conditions throughout the world. Not surprisingly, globalisation has shaped not only concepts of economic growth but also perceptions of governance and the roles and functions of government. In the twenty-first century the driving forces of globalisation—increasing international trade and investment, rapid progress in information, communications and transportation technology, the increasing mobility of factors of production, the rapid transmission of financial capital across national borders, the emergence of knowledge economies and electronic commerce, the spread of innovation capability, and the worldwide expansion of markets for goods and services—are creating new pressures on governments to decentralise. Globalisation is de-concentrating economic activity among and within countries. It increases pressures on governments to enhance the administrative and fiscal capacity of subnational regions, cities, towns, and rural areas in order to facilitate the participation of individuals and enterprises in a global marketplace and to benefit from it.

Studies fail to reflect unanimity as to how the trend of decentralisation is related to globalisation. A number of scholars have argued that globalisation causes decentralisation, yet others argue on the contrary that the consequence of globalisation is government centralisation. Globalisation is often defined broadly as networks of growing interdependence in world economics and politics.²² In other words, globalisation is an umbrella term, covering a wide variety of growing linkages and dependences between countries. Typically, the

global trend of growing interdependence is attributed to radically reduced communication and transportation costs.²³ The reduction of barriers to economic exchange and goods' mobility is perhaps regarded as the most important component of globalisation. Thomas Friedman describes it as: "The inexorable integration of markets, nation-states and technologies to a degree never witnessed before—in a way enabling individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before."²⁴

Economic theories and some empirical evidence suggest that economic globalisation promotes economic decentralisation of nation-states and even threatens to undermine domestic political authority.²⁵ J. Sorens has argued that sometimes, separatist movements and centrifugal political forces are encouraged by global market forces of globalisation.²⁶ On the theoretical plain Alesina and Spolaore predict that disintegration of nation-states becomes more likely as a result of economic globalisation:

*Political separatism should go hand in hand with economic integration. We feel that the current European experience, the idea of a Europe of regions, and the separatism of Quebec in the context of NAFTA yield some support for this implication. Furthermore, the incentives for the states of the former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia to break away would have been much lower if they had expected to be economically isolated instead of integrated with the rest of the world, in particular, with Western Europe... The benefit of country size on economic performance should decrease with the increase of international economic integration and removal of trade barriers.*²⁷

Bolton and Ronald have opined that an alternative to the disintegration of nation-states is decentralisation, in particular, fiscal decentralisation. They further argue: "... any benefits of decentralisation that might be obtained in a world with several nations may also be achieved within a unified nation by replicating the administrative structure of the world with several nations and implementing a suitable degree of decentralisation of authority among the regions."²⁸ Thus, the central government may prefer to decentralise government services to mitigate the adverse effects of globalisation. In addition, as Schneider argued: "Free trade, international treaties and loan conditions led central governments to choose or be forced to abdicate their traditional roles and left critical functions to non-central government entities if they were to be performed at all."²⁹ If sub-national governments step in to provide the services, the degree of government decentralisation increases. Correspondingly, one can expect to observe a positive relation between globalisation and decentralisation. Contrary to such expectations, Geoffrey Garrett and Jonathan Rodden have shown that the integration of international markets has been associated with fiscal centralisation,

rather than decentralisation.³⁰

Decentralisation and Women's Political Participation

The growing corpus of literature on decentralisation deals with varied aspects of the notion of decentralisation, as is manifest from brief appraisal supra. However, there is paucity of literature on decentralisation's role in women's political participation. Viewed in broad spectrum, decentralisation can affect women's status in two ways. In the first instance, decentralisation may lead directly to women-responsive policies, mainly because decentralisation is traditionally linked with responsiveness to citizens based on the threat of exit. Secondly, decentralisation may increase the number of women in politics, in turn leading to more women-responsive policies. Despite Constituting roughly half of the population women historically have been marginalised by the political process in most of the countries throughout the globe. The process of decentralisation entails the potential of impacting women's status, because decentralisation is a high priority for international aid and cooperation, and it makes desirable to know the gender implications of an institutional reform garnering significant development resources today.

Viewed in broad perspective, term 'decentralisation' making in reality describes a host of reforms designed at least in part to increase local voice in policy. Rondinelli and Cheema's typology of decentralisation creates useful distinctions between very different levels of decentralisation followed in different countries or in different policy areas. They make a distinction between deconcentration, delegation, devolution, and privatisation, in order of increasing dispersion of power. 'Deconcentration' refers to situations where the national government shifts some power to its own offices at the local level. 'Delegation' takes place when the national government delegates authority to 'parastatal' organisations at the local or regional level. 'Devolution' refers to national governments handing over authority to legally recognised, geographically identifiable units of local government with their own elections. 'Privatisation' involves a contract between sectors of the national government and private providers of services.

Rondinelli and Cheema's typology is helpful to clarify the term decentralisation in two important ways. First, it demonstrates that there is need to look at the details of decentralisation to determine how much power is really being delegated. Political reforms commonly referred to by politicians as 'decentralisation' are often in reality deconcentration: the national government retains a very strong degree of authority in policy making but perhaps ministry officials out in the field have some additional leeway in implementation.

Secondly, Rondinelli's typology directs towards looking within a

policy area that is being decentralised and recognises that different aspects of the same policy may correspond to different levels of decentralisation. There is a need to identify the variety of forces that constrain women's political participation before considering the effects of decentralisation. The factors constraining women's political participation can be grouped into three categories: structural, cultural, and institutional. Structural factors are "supply-side" variables that affect the size of the pool of women who are eligible and qualified to serve in public office or as civil servants. For example, women's literacy rates, average education levels and average income reflect the extent to which women have the most basic resources necessary to participate in elections or be within a pool of eligible political recruits. These factors are most striking in developing countries where more limited resources for education are generally devoted to young sons instead of young daughters. For instance, Ohene-Konadu's survey of Ghanaian women found that lack of personal resources was the leading cause of women's low participation in regional councils.³²

Cultural factors extenuating women's involvement in politics comprise a given society's expectations about what behaviors are appropriate for men and women in the political sphere. Where women are seen as suitable for political office they are more likely socialised to have leadership skills and develop political connections that encourage involvement in the public sphere. In countries or regions where women are not seen as having the skills necessary to be leaders, women tend not be socialised to see themselves in a powerful role. Inglehart and Norris find support for the notion that cultural factors underlay women's representation at the national level. Their index of cultural equality, a composite of five questions from the World Values Survey, is the only significant predictor of the percentage of women in the lower house after controlling for the country's level of development and the district magnitude.³³ Similarly, Reynolds finds that a proxy for cultural attitudes toward women, the dominant religion in a country, is a significant predictor of women in the legislature.³⁴

According to Lijphart, institutional factors also play a role in affecting women's chances for nomination and election. The proportional representation systems with a high district magnitude and low thresholds benefit women.³⁵ In electoral systems with more seats per district and a proportional formula for allocating seats, party leaders are more willing to 'balance' ballots with women candidates. Of course, women must be placed high on the ticket for them to actually win seats. In contrast, in single-member districts a party either wins or loses the election, and party leaders are less likely to field 'riskier' female candidates. Reservation of seats or quotas is another important institutional device for guaranteeing a minimum number of women

seat-holders in the legislature. Stetson and Mazur have opined that the existence of women's policy machinery, or an agency devoted to advancing the rights of women, is necessary for feminist policy outcomes.³⁶

Spurring Women Responsive Policies

Decentralisation or diffusion of power from the national level to the local level may lead to women responsive policies. The noteworthy benefit of decentralisation is that it leads to the optimal provision of public goods. Charles Tiebout, as far back as in 1956, laid out the argument for why decentralisation leads to efficient levels of public goods.³⁷ Assuming that voters are perfectly mobile, decentralised provision of public goods creates competition among regional governments. Voters can exit a region, or 'vote with their feet', choosing to live in a region that provides their preferred basket of public goods. Decentralisation allows the level of government with better information about the needs and resources of its area to tailor policies accordingly. World Bank's publication, *Decentralisation: Briefing Notes*, advances the argument that decentralisation encourages civil society.³⁸ This argument suggests that when local people for the first time have a voice in creating and/or implementing policy, they will have an incentive to become engaged in local politics. Putman et al have opined that the increased knowledge and fluency with current local issues alone may spawn the development of different interest groups that also enhance civil society.³⁹

Some scholars have raised doubts about the merits of decentralisation, which directly challenge the notion that decentralisation empowers women. Firstly, decentralisation may lead to a 'race to the bottom'. Secondly, local governments may not have better information about their voters' preferences. Thirdly, decentralisation may simply empower local elites, replicating at the local level the exclusion of marginalised groups at the national level. Fourthly, some countries may not have proper resources to finance and implement public services.⁴⁰

Descriptive Representation of Women

Scholars like Neylan et al.,⁴¹ and Vengroff Fugiero et al.,⁴² suggest at least three reasons why we generally see more women in city councils and regional parliaments than in national assemblies. It is important to note that all three explanations rest on societal constructions of gender roles for women- what sorts of behavior are and are not appropriate for women to engage in. Gender roles in most countries proscribe women to the majority of household duties whether or not they also work outside the home. For many women, participating in a local

council is much more feasible than traveling to the country's capital given the burdens of childrearing, cleaning, and cooking. Women may be seen active in local politics because society has relegated them for the most part, to low status decision-making. As Norris and Lovenduski have opined, in particular, party leaders may encourage women to run for local or regional elections which are lower stakes than recruit them for higher political office. Or women's socialisation may lead them to feel competent for local level politics but not higher office.⁴³

According to Lyn Kathlene, women may gravitate to local politics because local issues are "women's issues," or styles of decision making in local or regional political groups are more similar to women's consensus-style behavior.⁴⁴ Kathlene also shows that women have a different committee style than men. Women are more likely than men to encourage all participants to talk and are less likely to interrupt others who are talking. Ohene, while looking at the effects of decentralisation in Ghana on women's participation, avers that despite a 30 percent quota in district assemblies, women constitute 7 percent of assembly-members countrywide. Factors such as a lack of funds, little training for women candidates, low literacy among women keep their participation low.⁴⁵

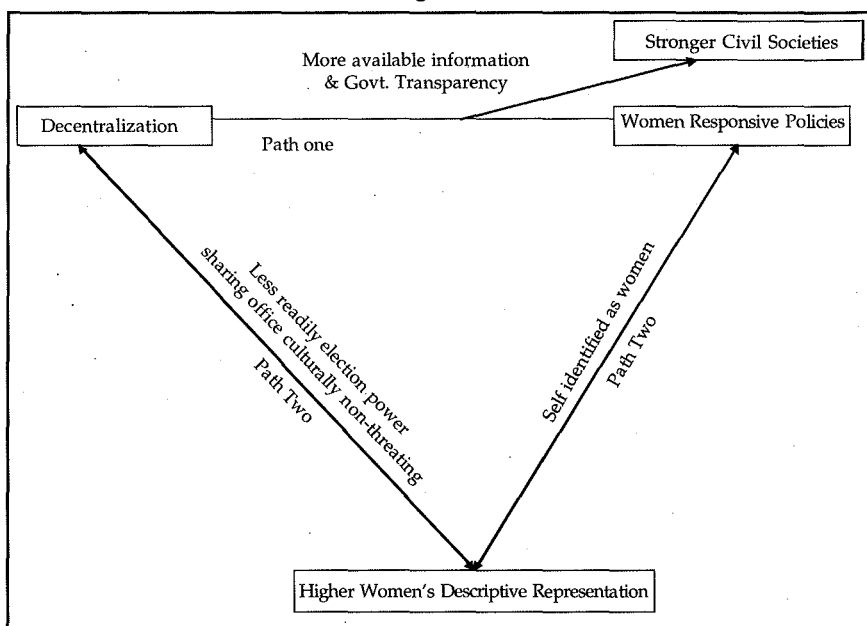
In broad terms, descriptive representation of women means electing or appointing women to positions of political authority. Substantive representation means women pursuing policies that benefit other women. Mazur defines feminist policy to include eight sub sectors: blueprint, political representation, equal employment, reconciliation, family law, reproductive rights, sexuality and violence, and public service delivery.⁴⁶ Sapiro likewise suggests that there are issues like women's health and child care that disproportionately affect women, and that many women feel are salient.⁴⁷

Women's descriptive and substantive representation is tied to two important factors. First, women's representation may be an end unto itself. According to Inter-Parliamentary Union, women hold 14.9 percent of seats in the lower house of legislative assemblies. The disparity between women's presence in the population, slightly over 50 per cent, and their political presence in national assemblies indicates that they are not equal in power to men. More descriptive representatives produce trust among historically marginalised groups and legitimacy of the government.⁴⁸ Descriptive representatives of women also encourage women who want to run for office or pursue other careers that women do have an equal chance. Besides, it is reasonable to assume that women, on the whole, are more likely to pursue issues affecting women than are men. Carroll's study of state legislators finds that all legislators believe that women make a difference on policy issues, she gave priority to legislation on families, children and health care, women's rights bills.⁴⁹

The existence of women's policy machinery, or an agency devoted to advancing the rights of women, is necessary for feminist policy outcomes. In other words, the descriptive representation of marginalised groups like women is necessary but insufficient for women's feminist substantive representation.

There are two paths by which decentralisation could lead to increased women's representation, as summarised in Fig. I.

Figure 1



Source: As per Carroll's classification on women's path based participation and decentralization.

Along path one, decentralisation leads directly to women-responsive policies by three mechanisms. Decentralisation could encourage stronger civil society and the participation of all kinds of groups formerly marginalised (*more civil society*). Decentralisation could also push decision-making to a geographic unit where it is cheaper for government officials to ascertain the preferences of their constituents (*better information*). Reciprocally, it could be easier for citizens to get information about politicians' behavior making decision-making more transparent and accountable (*transparency*).

Along path two, decentralisation leads to women responsive policies by first encouraging more women into political office (higher women's descriptive representation), which then leads to women-responsive policies. Women participate more in local and regional politics than men. Three mechanisms may explain this trend. First, the personal cost

of getting elected to regional office is lower than national office, making it more accessible to women who are often economically dependent on men (*lower barriers to entry*).

Second, local and regional office often carries less power, lower salary and lower prestige than national office (*lower status office*) which could induce a 'feminisation' of local political positions. Third, women may face lower cultural sanctions from their communities for running for local office, an extension of women's domestic sphere (*culturally non-threatening*).

Higher women's descriptive representation then leads to women responsive policies by one key mechanism. The physical presence of women, if it reaches a critical mass (say 15%) where women are no longer "tokens," encourage women to act for women constituents. The identity of "woman" may now have higher salience for individual women because they perceive they have a large enough group and potentially a veto power in some situations. The critical mass of women encourages more women to *self-identify as women* and become advocates for women-responsive policies. The emerging political trends in India are progressively getting inclined towards the second path and it will take some more years for women to strengthen their positions at local and regional levels before they aspire for role at the central level. In other words, women will continue to follow the second path as shown in Fig. 1, for some more years to come before they are capable of pursuing the first path.

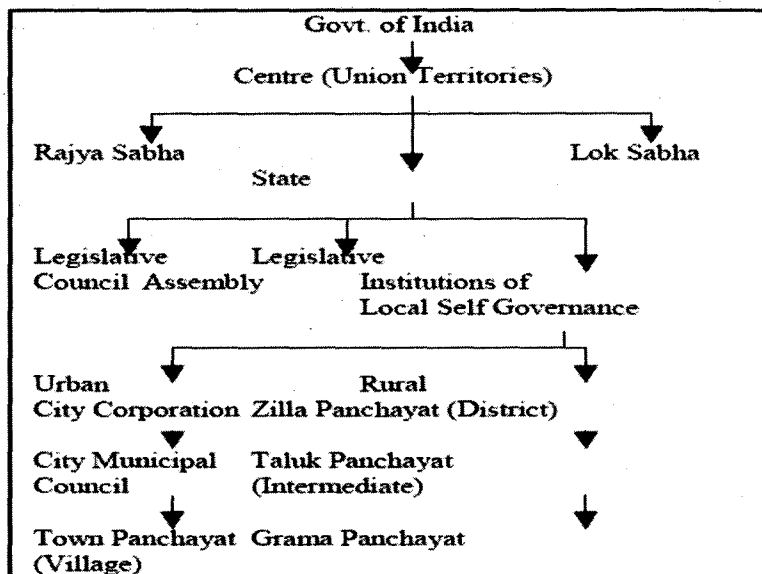
The clear cut division of powers in the legislative, executive and judicial branches of India is a pointer towards decentralisation to some extent. This is best illustrated in Fig. 2.

The union government comprises executive and parliament, which consists of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. Parliament is the supreme legislative body that enacts laws and the union executive is also responsible to parliament. In states also there are bicameral/unicameral legislatures, called state legislative assembly and state legislative council. Then there are local self government institutions at the district and village levels.

Women's Political Participation in India

Concerted efforts have been made in recent years to empower women in India. In various plan periods, the issues regarding women empowerment has been given priority. From fifth five year plan onwards there has been a remarkable shift from welfare oriented approach to development approach approach to empowerment. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution of India provided opportunity to women to take part in active politics. The year 2001 was declared as the year of women's empowerment for enhancing their

Figure 2: Decentralisation in India



status. To achieve the goal, the government introduced different programmes, identified strategies, established different institutions and made various legal provisions. In spite of these efforts and actions, women still lag behind the men. However, the process of women empowerment has been impeded by frequent occurrence of the incidences like early marriage, female feticides and infanticide, dowry, bride burning, rape, molestation, kidnapping etc. The record of crime against women indicates an increasing trend.⁵⁰ The position of women in the social, economic and political fields is by no means equal to that of their male counterparts.

Besides low female literacy, there are many other factors that have contributed to gender bias. Girl child is still given less priority in certain parts of India. Past studies indicate that it is the people's perception in general that the birth of a girl child is less desirable and evokes less happiness than that of a boy child.⁵¹ It is ingrained in the Indian psyche, cutting across religion, caste and region. Since her birth, she is victimized in all spheres including education, employment, nutrition and social status. The World Economic Forum, in its first gender gap study published in 2005, placed India at 53rd position among 58 nations, which shows a significant gap in male and female achievements. In the same study, the rank of India in terms of political empowerment was 24th at both primary and grassroots level.⁵² India's National Population Policy 2000 specifically identified the low status of women in India as an important barrier to the achievement of goals towards maternal and

child welfare.⁵³ Further UNDP in its various Human Development Reports since 1990 has placed India at a very low level of development regarding the position of women in terms of various indicators such as adult literacy, gross enrolment, share of seats in parliament and the professional and technical positions held by them, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Development Indicators of Women in India

Indicators	1990		1995		2000		2005		2007-08	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Life Expectancy	NA	NA	60.4	60.3	63.3	62.5	65.0	61.86	5.3	62.3
Adult Literacy	29	57	35.2	63.7	43.5	67.1	47.8	73.4	47.4	73.4
Gross Enrolment	NA	NA	45.8	63.8	46.0	61.0	56.0	64.0	60.0	68.0
Seat Share in Parliament	NA	NA	07.3	92.7	08.9	91.1	09.3	90.7	09.8	90.2
Share of Professional & Technical Persons	NA	NA	20.5	79.5	20.5	79.5	NA	NA	NA	NA
Gender related Development Index	NA		0.401 (R-99)		0.545 (R-108)		0.586 (R-98)		0.600 (R-113)	
Gender Employment Measure	NA		0.226 (R-101)		NA		NA		NA	

Source: UNDP Reports.

The gender-related development values, as shown in Table 1 reveal that women have consistently been lagging behind. India has been placed in the 113th rank with a GDI value of 0.600 as against a rank of 89 with GDI value of 0.753 in case of a small neighboring country like Sri Lanka (UNDP, 2007-08). The rank of India has also gone down from 99 in 1995 to 113 in 2007-08 and has been fluctuating from year to year.

Undoubtedly, literacy rates for both males and females in India have witnessed increasing trends over the years from 1951 to 2001, the gap between them were also simultaneously increasing till 1981 and since then it has started declining. The progress has not been along expected line. This is evident from Table 2.

It is evident from above table the growth in female literacy in India remained comparatively low as compared to growth in male literacy rate. Undoubtedly, the growth in female literacy rate in 2001 recorded 13.38 percent increase over 1991, but the gap between the male literacy rate and female literacy rate was still 21.59 in 2001. According to the provisional census figures for 2011, the overall literacy rate in India

Table 2
Literacy Rate in India 1951-2011

<i>Census Year</i>	<i>Persons</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>
1951	18.33	27.16	8.86
1961	28.3	40.40	15.35
1971	34.45	45.96	21.97
1981	43.57	56.38	29.76
1991	52.21	64.13	39.29
2001	64.84	75.26	53.67
2011	74.04	82.14	65.46

Source: Government of India, India 2010: A Reference Annual, New Delhi: Publications Division, 2010, p. 11. Also see, Economic Times, 31 March 2011.

rose to 74.04 percent, with male literacy rate being 82.14 and the female literacy rate at 65.46. The literacy rate improved sharply among females as compared to males in 2011. The effective literacy rate for males increased from 75.26 percent in 2001 to 82.14 percent in 2011 thereby recording an increase of 6.9 percent, it increased by 17.8 percent for females to go from 53.67 in 2001 to 65.46 percent in 2011.⁵⁴

There exist great disparities in the literacy of males and females in some states of the India. The low literacy rate is one of the reasons for women lagging behind in political participation. In conventional analysis it means activities related to electoral politics like voting, campaigning, holding party offices and contesting elections. But in applications, it refers to all voluntary actions intended to influence the making of public policies, the administration of public affairs and choice of political leaders at all levels of governance.

Political interventions by women of India today vary from movement for peace and good governance to protest against dowry, rape, domestic violence, food adulteration, price rise etc.⁵⁵ Participation of women in formal politics can be analysed with several representational indicators. Representation of Women in Lok Sabha is shown in Table 3

It is worth noting that the political mobilisation of women and their participation in elections has steadily increased since the first General Elections of 1952. Between 1952-1980 for instance, women's participation increased by 12 percent against the turn out of men which increased by only 6 percent. In the general elections of 2004, the all India percentage of women voter turnout was 48 percent. As regards women voters' turnout, from 37.1 percent in the first general elections in 1952 it increased gradually over the years to 55.6 by 1999. Notably, the gap between female and male voters was 15.9 percent in 1952, but it decreased slowly over successive elections and came down to 8.4

Table 3
Representation Women in Lok Sabha 1952-2014

<i>Lok Sabha</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Total Seats</i>	<i>Male Members</i>	<i>Female Members</i>	<i>Percentage of female members to total</i>
I	1952	499	477	22	4.41
II	1957	500	473	27	5.40
III	1962	503	469	34	6.76
IV	1967	523	492	31	5.93
V	1971	521	499	22	4.22
VI	1977	544	525	19	3.49
VII	1980	544	516	28	5.15
VIII	1984	544	500	44	8.09
IX	1989	517	490	27	5.22
X	1991	544	505	39	7.18
XI	1996	543	504	39	7.18
XII	1998	543	500	43	7.92
XIII	1999	543	494	49	9.02
XIV	2004	543	499	44	8.1
XV	2009	545	486	59	10.82
XVI	2014	544	479	65	13.56

Source: Compiled from 'Lok Sabha Members', Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi.

percent in 1996. It had remained at 8.3 percent in 2004 general elections.⁵⁵

This percentage increase in the turnout of women in elections has however not translated into a larger number of women being represented in the legislative bodies. Competitive elections has not necessarily led to better political representation of women in Indian politics. The candidates fielded by various political parties are still predominantly male and women account for only five to ten percent of all candidates across parties and regions. As reflected in Table 3, the percentage of representation of women in the Lok Sabha varies from 4.4 in 1952 to 8.1 in 1984, declining to 5.2 in 1989, rising to 7.9 in 1998 and 9.02 in 1999 and again declining to 8.1 in 2004 and rising to 10.82 in 2009. On the whole the representation of women in parliament (Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha) and the state assemblies remains low. Thus despite the increase in electoral participation of women, their representation in the formal political structures has not changed much.

Women Political Participation in other Countries

According to the data compiled upto August 2011 by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and shown in Table 4, the total number of MPs in the world is 45, 128. However, the gender breaking is known for 45, 081. Out of these, the number of male MPs is 36, 365, while the number of female MPs is 8, 716. The percentage of women MPs is 19.3 per cent.

Table 4
Combined Women Strength

Total MPs	45128
Gender break-up known for	45'081
Men	36'365
Women	8'716
Percentage of women	19.3%

Source: IPU at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

The regional averages of women MPs is shown in Table 5. It is observed that Europe – OSCE member countries, including Nordic countries have 21.8 percent of women MPS in both houses combined. In Americas this percentage is 22.2 per cent. In Europe – OSCE member countries, excluding Nordic Countries, the percentage of women MPs is 20.3 per cent. in Sub-Saharan Africa this number is 19.6 percent whereas in Asia it is 18.0 per cent. The Pacific Region has 14.8 percent while the Arab World has 10.3 per cent.

Table 5
Regional Average Representation

	<i>Single House or lower House</i>	<i>Upper House or Senate</i>	<i>Both Houses combined</i>
Nordic countries	42.1%	—	—
Europe - OSCE member countries			
including Nordic countries	22.2%	20.2%	21.8%
Americas	22.0%	23.1%	22.2%
Europe - OSCE member countries			
excluding Nordic countries	20.3%	20.2%	20.3%
Sub-Saharan Africa	19.7%	18.9%	19.6%
Asia	18.3%	15.2%	18.0%
Pacific	12.5%	32.6%	14.8%
Arab States	10.9%	7.5%	10.3%

Source: IPU at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

It becomes evident from the comparative analysis that political participation of women in India is very low as compared to the world average and even in the regional averages. It is in this backdrop that reservation of women in the union parliament and state legislatures assumes significance.

Reserving Seats for Women

The Constitution (Eighty-first) Amendment Bill, which sought to reserve for women one-third of the seats in Lok Sabha and state assemblies was introduced in September 1996. The bill was referred to a joint select committee. The resubmitted bill was Phread base discussed paslomal in 1997 and 1998. Since then the bill has been stalled. The issue of reservation did not emanate from the women's movement. Nor has the debate been confined to the movement. The possibility of such a large claim by women is of major significance to both established and entrenched interests. Passions have risen to a fever pitch, both in parliament and outside, especially in the visual and print media. Notably, the public ascribed authorship of the measure to feminists.⁵⁶

Many feminists have welcomed the bill and the political vicissitudes through which it is passing. Male members of parliament who oppose the bill have indulged in aggression and violence on the floor of the House; and there has been explicit male collusion to block the bill. The "male plot," has reportedly done women a service by uniting women parliamentarians across party lines as never before. Yet the Indian women's movement is bitterly divided on the issue. One section, led by leftist female members of parliament, has vociferously campaigned in its favour. But an equal number of activists have been hesitant, doubtful, indifferent, and even hostile to the proposed measure. Women's participation in local governance has usually been discussed in the context of Panchayat Raj, introduced in 1957. The solution at that time was a provision for co-opting two women who were interested to work among women and children. This initiative was constitutionalised in April 1993, when the Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act 1992 and The Constitution (Seventy-fourth Amendment) Act 1992 were enacted. The first relates to panchayats and the second to municipalities. In all panchayats and municipalities, one-third of seats are for women. One-third of the offices of chairpersons of panchayats and municipalities are also reserved for women.

Conclusion

Women's political participation has seemingly made a good beginning with the success of Panchayati Raj institutions. The lack of

political will on the part of some political parties nurtured on 'male predominance' is the main stumbling block in the smooth passage of the Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill. However, optimism is there about its passage if pressure starts building from women groups and the civil society. All Political parties in India will have to summon the political will to go for this breakthrough, which will surely have far-going and profound effects on the ground. On the other hand, India's dismal 10 percent representation of women in Parliament indicates that without a constitutionally mandated change, it will continue to remain a laggard on that index. The experience of working a mandated system of 33 percent (now raised to 50 percent in certain states) reservation for women in panchayati raj institutions has amply demonstrated that enhanced political participation of women at the grassroots deepens democracy in many ways. It delivers more of the constitutional guarantees of rooting out discrimination on the basis of sex or caste, providing equality of opportunity for women, and redirecting resources in favour of the most disadvantaged in the population – who, even within the most deprived groups, are likely to be women. The World Economic Forum in its 2009 report on global gender disparities ranks India 114th in a list of 134 countries. Given the troubling statistics, starting with the worsening sex ratio in the 0-6 age group in the population, eliminating the gender gap in its various dimensions should be a top political priority for rising India. Greater representation of women in legislatures and parliament is likely to force a shift of focus towards this priority. The world over, women's empowerment and advancement through progressive struggles, and by right, have had a highly beneficial impact on politics, the economy, health, education, culture, and society. In order to augment women's participation in the political process in India, it is essential to build up their capacity to do so and this capacity-building can be facilitated through sensitising, incentivising and galvanising women. Education is the best medium to sensitize women about their rights and they should be incentivized through membership in political institutions and their galvanisation would help in accelerating the process of increased political participation.

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