



THE GENDER TURN IN INDIAN ELECTIONS: WHEN MOBILIZING WOMEN CHANGES PARTY COMPETITION

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ABSTRACT:

In recent elections in India, attitudes regarding females as “dependent” voters have changed and females are now viewed as a decisive portion of the electorate. The general election of 2024 seals this change as females voted in parity with men, and all the parties in the contest sought to win the pseudo political prize of “women’s welfare” and then continued to act in a way that promoted women’s welfare as a political objective. This paper argues that India is now experiencing a gender turn in electoral politics, which is far more complex than simply being a rise in women’s turnout. The gender turn is extending the scope of party competition and is reshaped around three interrelated shifts; 1) the construction of proximate and supportive mobilization infrastructures for women’s enfranchisement (facilitation by the Election Commission, self-help groups, and dense women’s networks); 2) a paradox i.e. women as “beneficiary-citizens” of the targeted welfare of married women that compels parties to compete on the politics of women’s everyday governance (food security, household infrastructure, cash transfers, and service delivery); and 3) the enduring representation paradox being a steep increase in the electorate’s women voters with no corresponding increase in women’s descriptive representation in the ranks of the party contestants and of the parliament.

By employing feminist political theory, the study interprets the participation of women in elections not as a simple turn out by a statistic; rather, it is a multidimensional struggle of woman for empowerment, voice, and recognition. Using electoral sociology, it shows the ways women’s collective networks and welfare ties influence the salience of issues, coalition construction, and campaign tactics. The author places these networks and ties on the Viksit Bharat @2047 scenario: official development discourse has placed these “Mahilayen” in the center of the development of the nation, but a Developing India discourse requires a change in movement from women being the only targeted recipients to women being the only agenda-setters and decision-makers of development. An out-of-the-box insight is that India’s gender turn is best understood as a transition from identity only competition to everyday state competition, where women’s votes compel parties to demonstrate effective governance - however this same process can reproduce paternalism if there is no sufficient closure in the system regarding the representation and political voice.

KEYWORDS:

GENDER TURN, WOMEN VOTERS, PARTY COMPETITION, WELFARE POLITICS, FEMINIST POLITICAL THEORY, ELECTORAL SOCIOLOGY, VIKSIT BHARAT @2047, REPRESENTATION PARADOX, SELF-HELP GROUPS, INDIA 2024 ELECTIONS.

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1. INTRODUCTION: WHAT “GENDER TURN” MEANS IN INDIAN ELECTORAL POLITICS

For most of the twentieth century, the electoral analysis of women in India was described in terms of a ‘gap’: the gap in participation, the gap in autonomy, and the gap in representation. In recent electoral democracies, this is a puzzling frame and yet framework women scholars are attempting to understand as women are no longer passive in the democratic process; they are central to the electoral process. Reports in the 2024 elections suggested women

and men’s participation was near-parity, and parties campaigned on and actively considered women’s preferences, welfare and ‘agency’ (Kumar). The Election Commission noted broad participation in the general elections (Election Commission of India).

The phrase ‘gender turn’ in this paper speaks to an even more profound transformation than just participation. The gender turn is articulated when the following is witnessed:

1. There is mass participation of women.
2. There is active competition amongst parties to mobilize women with strategies and tailored benefits.
3. There are modifications in the “rules of competition” with regards to the issues pursued, the coalitions formed, and the claims to legitimacy.

Concurrently, the elections unfolding in India in 2024 also showcased a paradox. While the elections showcased a significant increase in women voters, the representation of women in candidate lists and also in parliament remained and still is woefully imbalanced. As per the estimates of the PRS, 74 women MPs were elected “in the 18th Lok Sabha and this is just a marginal increase from the elections held in 2019 (PRS Legislative Research).” The paradox here is democratic in nature, women’s votes are present in higher volumes than ever, but the women themselves are still absent in the legislatures. Lastly the paper considers the vision of a Viksit Bharat. The vision for national development repeatedly considers women as a fulcrum around which the development of the entire country pivots, and the statement of the Women’s Reservation Bill has as a stated object, the consideration of women’s Political empowerment as a pre-requisite for achieving “by 2047, a Vikasit Bharat” (Gazette of India 2). In the discourse of the interim budget as well, “Mahilayen” are described as a key protagonist for development, and the empowerment of women is placed as the foremost instrument for national advancement (Press Information Bureau). It is in the light of this that women’s electoral mobilization becomes a critical consideration vis a vis the kind of democracy and development India aspires to.

2. THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 FEMINIST POLITICAL THEORY: EMPOWERMENT, RECOGNITION, AND THE PROBLEM OF “BENEFICIARY CITIZENSHIP”

Feminist political theory compels one to contemplate what sort of power is created when women have the franchise. Naila Kabeer puts forth a definition that is often cited and that views empowerment not as mere tokenism and inclusion but rather as a widening of the actual choices available: “Empowerment thus refers to the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (Kabeer 20). Such a definition is of particular importance in regard to elections as it reframes the parameters of analysis from participation as mere submission to participation as actual potential. Voting in and of itself can serve as an act of empowerment insofar as it increases women’s bargaining power in households, communities, and at the level of the state, even when there is no correlation to an increase of women MPs in Parliament.

Nevertheless, the participation subfield of feminist theory cautions against unqualified celebration of participation. Much of the women-targeted Indian welfare politics revolves around the construction and maintenance of

household welfare and infrastructure. Expanded welfare can claim to enhance capabilities, however, we can also identify a scenario of what this paper terms ‘beneficiary citizenship’. Women are constructed as thankful subjects rather than acknowledged as political subjects. The electoral competition that promises redistribution without recognition is hierarchically reproductive, where women are the principal grant beneficiaries, but lack a voice, visibility, and agency. Fraser’s classic formulation is particularly useful here. “Recognition and redistribution are needed by those who suffer cultural injustice and economic injustice simultaneously” Fraser 6.

2.2 ELECTORAL SOCIOLOGY: MOBILIZATION, NETWORKS, AND PARTY COMPETITION

Electoral sociology explains the relationship between the social structures of a society and their political behavior, including their turnout and vote choice. In the case of India, the impact of women’s political participation is influenced by the access to and the nature of the social and campaign networks, as well as local institutions. In a foundational study, Praveen Rai states that there is a significant rise in participation via women’s increased voting and electioneering (Rai 47). Others, including Rai, have pointed out the catalytic role social contacts and interest in politics play as participation predictors (Rai).

What changes the nature of party competition is not only that women vote more. Their mobilization takes place through specific, collective, and organized forms—Self Help Groups (SHGs). When women mobilize through dense social networks, political parties face a shifted electoral landscape. The persuasion is less individualized; campaign communication is transferred through peers and is more focused on day to day governing outcomes.

2.3 THE CORE ARGUMENT: “PARTICIPATION WITHOUT PRESENCE” RESHAPES COMPETITION

The main argument of this paper is that there is a new pattern of participation without presence in relation to gender in India. Women’s turnout is increasing (participation), parties are now trying to gain support from women (competition shifts), but there is still a shortage of women in top political positions (presence absent). This pattern does not suggest that women’s participation is politically “thin.” It suggests that even in the presence of male dominated legislatures, women’s influence still exists through policy demand, welfare accountability, and issue salience.

3. A SHORT POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE GENDER TURN IN INDIA

The shift toward and within gender studies began long before the 2020s. The nomad and sociocultural dimensions of the overshadowed, often ignored, supposed invisibility of women and their political dimension and functioning were underlined. The gap of subphantom political and relational space is among the most enduring. Symbolic and sub-representational space does not constitute the political. The duality of space and the

paradox of closure reflect central spatial dimensions of politics. No space is political without social anticorporalization and contraction, evoking rupture and splintering. The validation of space and social closure converge on the elementary paradox of representation. The duality of space, the sub-representational and political, is political rupture. The class-dominant subordinate social structural order's politics of rupture its closure of sub-represented class-dominant. The duality of space and the paradox of closure reflect central spatial dimensions of politics. No space is political without social anticorporalization and contraction, evoking rupture and splintering. The validation of space and social closure converge on the elementary paradox of representation. The duality of space, the sub-representational and political, is political rupture. The dominant subordinate social structural order's politics of rupture is its closure of sub-represented class dominant. The duality of space and the paradox of closure reflect the central spatial dimensions of politics.

The national advocacy such as she received the parliamentary reservation culminated in the Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Bill of 2023 (popularly referred to as the women's reservation Act / Nari Shakti Vandan). "During the seventy-fifth year of Independence, India aims to become Vikasit Bharat by the year 2047, to achieve this goal, the contribution of all sections is needed, especially women" (Gazette Of India 2). True empowerment, the text states, has "greater participation in the decision-making process." (Gazette Of India). There is too much text above to speak of empowerment and welfare in the same breath. This is development and the text acknowledges the need of political power to develop the welfare of women.

Therefore, for the first time, in 2024, women entered the general elections, not as an "add-on" category but a primary democratic constituency, shaped by local lived experiences, supported by local institutions and an increasingly gendered development discourse.

4. HOW WOMEN'S MOBILIZATION HAPPENED: MECHANISMS BEHIND THE 2024 MOMENT

4.1 ELECTION MANAGEMENT AND FACILITATION: MAKING VOTING SOCIALLY AND LOGISTICALLY POSSIBLE

One explanation for the gender shift is the "infrastructure of participation." The Election Commission's SVEEP activities and related voter management have attempted to address gaps in registration, access, and assurance. UNDP's documentation of SVEEP describes participation in the training and facilitation of voters as one means of enhancing the participation continuum in electoral processes (UNDP). Administrative support makes it possible for women to leave the house and participate in public life in activities that would otherwise be considered political. Even if women have little autonomy in their daily activities, administrative support reduces the "cost" of exercising their franchise.

That said, support alone does not account for why women's turnout growth has been sustained over multiple electoral cycles. The more significant sociological shift has to do with the increased social acceptability and political utility of women's participation.

4.2 NETWORKS AND COLLECTIVE POLITICAL CAPACITY: SELF-HELP GROUPS AS "POLITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE"

Electoral sociology focuses on participation and Prillaman focuses on 'Women's Groups' to explain one mechanism: "Women that had participated in the SHG intervention were twice as likely to attend a local public meeting (Gram Sabha) or make a claim on the local leader" (Prillaman 4). The numbers alone indicate something significant. The new cohesion among women organizes and information disseminates network. The learned civic skills from that network also alters the practice of voting to a collective act rather than an individual one.

Engagement on the SHG networks also demonstrates enhanced Political Participation and Awareness and Entitlement Utilization (Kumar et al.). The implication does not end there. The Social Mobilization of Women, does not entail the persuasion of individuals, but activating Social Systems that enhance and focus the participation of individuals to articulate Political claims.

4.3 WELFARE AND EVERYDAY GOVERNANCE: WHY WOMEN BECOME HIGH-SALIENCE VOTERS

Women's place within the state, whether every day (food, health, cooking fuel, water, sanitation, child-care, safety) or political, is central. In IndiaSpend's coverage of the 2024 election, a woman voter notes, 'Since this election, people want to talk to us women rather than men' (Kumar). This is a remarkable social shift. The women's vote is being treated as a commodity of exchangeable political power. Note, however, that this same coverage describes women as conditional voters, that is, as demanding governance (Kumar) 'drainage, food grains, and pensions' (Kumar). This is demanding, but governance.

From a feminist standpoint, this is both encouraging and disconcerting. Encouraging, because it is articulate. Disconcerting, because it is articulate within the context of demand that we still remain within the constraints of a patriarchal bargain, where(s) women's voices, interests, and demands are heard, but only through the permissible channels that sustain (male) control of the party, its leadership, and its candidates. The gender turn is thus not the conclusion of the patriarchal order. Instead, it is opening a new frontier.

5. WHEN MOBILIZING WOMEN CHANGES PARTY COMPETITION

This section explains *how* women's mobilization alters party competition. The change is not only rhetorical ("we respect women") but structural: it affects issue agendas, campaign organization, and the meaning of development.

5.1 ISSUE AGENDA SHIFT: FROM IDENTITY-ONLY COMPETITION TO “EVERYDAY-STATE COMPETITION”

The pattern of competition of votes in India has for a long time been influenced by a plethora of factors including caste, religion, region, and class structure of society. The ‘gender turn’ does not remove these factors; rather, it rearranges the hierarchy of the issues by bringing in a new powerful one, which is everyday governance outcomes which women can assess. Thus, political parties can now compete with one another to claim the reduction of burdens women face daily by providing household infrastructure, cash transfers, food security, and service delivery, among other things.

The ‘Women’s Reservation Bill’ has been officially described in documents as focusing on these initiatives aimed at enhancing the ‘ease of living’ of women which include assistance with cooking fuel and the distribution of household toilets (Gazette of India 2). Like the Interim Budget explained in the press, ‘Mahilayen’, which is spelled in Hindi, is identified as one of the ‘four major castes of focus’ and in these documents it is stated, ‘Their empowerment and well-being will drive the country forward’ (Press Information Bureau).

The focus for women is described in the documents as the political parties and the state describing women as the drivers of development which narrates them as the focus of development. This means that to be seen as a party focusing on development, a political party must also be seen as focusing on women’s development. Therefore, the above stated comments are evidence of how political parties and the state narrate women as the engines of development.

5.2 ORGANIZATIONAL SHIFT: PARTIES TREAT WOMEN AS PERSUADERS, NOT ONLY VOTERS

There are at least two ways to rethink how to organize political parties compared to how they used to mobilize women. One is to increase the role of women campaign intermediaries through the SHG networks and local women mobilizers who help share messages and organize turnout. The second is to alter how parties define electoral gains to include tracking the welfare asset and political value of women’s groups, the presence of women in households, and the service delivery at the households.

The politically actionable nature of Rai’s (2009) argument about the predictive nature of political interest and social networking is that parties are in competition to create or co-opt those social networks. In this sense, political competition is, to some degree, a struggle over the ‘political social capital’ that resides in women’s groups.

5.3 THE PARADOX OF CANDIDATE SELECTION: WOMEN’S VOTES RISE, TICKETS DO NOT

Notwithstanding these alterations, the under-selection of women candidates persist. PRS 2024 Legislative Research attributes 74 women MPs to the year. The analyses by the media and civil society also record the under-numerosity of women candidates and the total absence of women

candidates in a number of constituencies (Democratic Association of Reforms, Indian Express) The outcome of this scenario is politically volatile. There is now a paradox in the reliance of parties on the women’s vote and the reluctance to share high tier power with women.

Here, the “out of the box” observation is that the gender shift is acting in this scenario as a paradigm shift in visibility. The opposite has occurred in the majority of democracies, where visibility increases first followed by participation. In India, it is participation, however, that is increasing at a much quicker rate than visibility. This inversion has a unique impact on the competition among parties. Parties must and can now offer women targeted policies as a considerable and homogeneous electorate, however, without meaningful internal policy changes by offering visible policies instead of candidacy. The danger is that this may apply a scalar shift in the ability of the electorate to be heard without benefitting from policy changes.

5.4 FEMINIST CRITIQUE: REDISTRIBUTION WITHOUT RECOGNITION CAN REPRODUCE PATERNALISM

Fraser’s line- “recognition and redistribution” (Fraser 6) provides a useful framework for understanding the danger of redistribution. Although recursive schemes mitigate suffering and increase the range of possible activities people can engage in, they can also be framed as benevolent gifts from the leaders, reinforcing the structure of patriarchal domination. When parties view women primarily as beneficiaries, women’s political identity can be constricted to gratitude, and denied authorship.

At the same time, feminist theory does not require the abandonment of the welfare state, rather, it requires a more positive vision of what state welfare should do. It should increase women’s strategic life choices (Kabeer 20) . In electoral terms, this means inquiring whether the competition between parties is likely to produce lasting changes in women’s autonomy- mobility, access to employment, asset ownership, safety, voice in politics or is it just short-term electoral gain.

6. INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE SOCIAL MEANING OF “WOMEN’S VOTE” IN 2024

There were a number of major analytical mistakes surrounding the elections that stated that, “women” acted as a consolidated vote block. Feminist literature cautions this kind of simplification; “Because of their intersectional identity... women of color are marginalized within both” (Crenshaw 1244) is what Kimberlé Crenshaw has described as the result of the politics of a single intersectional framework; women, are, as a result of their combined identifiers, disempowered within both groups.

In the case of India, gender is interwoven with caste, class, religion, area, and rural versus urban division. The increase in women’s voter turnout does not suggest that women are voting the same way. Rather, the concept of ‘gender turn’ ought to be understood as representing an additional layer of politics. Women navigate the appeals of

political parties through the prism of their communities, and through their gendered experiences of the state. This complex view is consistent with electoral sociology which maintains that turnout and vote choice are the results of complex, combined identities, not a single identity, and that there are multiple, and overlapping, memberships at play.

On the other hand, the gender turn creates altered forms of political competition in parties, not the formation of a single “women’s party”. This is because every party is forced to compete across a wide range of multiple female constituencies: women in rural areas who are part of the Self-Help Groups, employed urban women, women who are unemployed and are facing inflation, women who wish to attain safety and dignity, women who are part of a caste/community network, and women who are embedded in a caste/community network. Even if these parties retain older identity coalitions, they risk losing legitimacy if they ignore the newer identity coalitions that these older identity coalitions give rise to.

7. VIKSIT BHARAT @2047: WHAT THE GENDER TURN DEMANDS FROM DEVELOPMENTAL POLITICS

7.1 VIKSIT BHARAT AS A POLITICAL NARRATIVE

“Viksit Bharat” is more than just a policy, it is a political narrative concerning the definition of progress as well as the definition of an agent of progress. According to Viksit Bharat's Interim Budget press release, Viksit Bharat, noted as an “Address to Nation”, talks about the need to improve “people’s capabilities and empower” and mentions “Mahilayen” (women) as some of the core target groups (Press Information Bureau). The Women’s Reservation Bill text development goal for 2047 also mentions the political participation of women as a target (Gazette of India 2).

A government document “Mission Statement of Viksit Bharat” outlines as part of the “Measurable Ambition” electoral strategy to include “Seventy per cent of women in economic activities” and “Mahilayen (Women)” as one of the vision’s four pillars. (“Mission Statement of Viksit Bharat” 1). This is a structural claim: without women’s economic participation, development will not be possible.

7.2 THE DEMOCRATIC TEST: FROM WOMEN AS VOTERS TO WOMEN AS CO-AUTHORS

From a Viksit Bharat perspective, the turn for gender equity during elections can be viewed in 2 contradictory ways.

Optimistic perspective: the growing ranks of women voters should be viewed as a democratic asset. They force political parties to provide a range of public goods, broaden the scope of welfare, and treat mundane governance as politically important. With women’s collective action, the governance in crucial human development areas can be made accountable.

From the political parties’ perspective, the turn could be seen as Deepening Paternalism: if political party contenders see women primarily as ‘beneficiaries’ of

public goods, it can foster an idea of parties competing in the philanthropy of ‘gifting’ goods to women. This still does not allow women the discretionary power to determine the policies or even leave the policy space or the political power structures.

Kabeers’ definition of ‘to Empower’ can make the difference clear. If the definition of empowerment is of the expansion of ‘strategic life choices’ (Kabeer 20), then Viksit Bharat requires political parties to make a connection between electoral mobilization to tier 1 transformations: women’s domination over resources, mobility, gainful employment, voice in political discourse, and placement in governing structures. Welfare programs may address some of these, but only if the welfare programs provide political inclusion and recognition—Fraser’s “redistribution and recognition” (Fraser 6) together.

7.3 A REFORM AGENDA IMPLIED BY THE GENDER TURN

Understanding the turn-in-gender democracy means making the following reforms.

- 1. Reform in the Parties:** Candidate selection, and internal party leadership structures must change to give presence to participatory democracy. The prescriptive democracy civil society reviews indicate that among MPs in parliaments, women remain severely underrepresented and their numbers as of 2024 do not offer any hope (Association for Democratic Reforms 2024).
- 2. Ability Focused Welfare:** Parties should vie for policy frameworks that shift women’s abilities for the better, in the long-term and in sustained ways, through education, jobs, asset ownership, and mobility, and safety as well as to address from/through short-term welfare transfers. This integrates better the Viksit Bharat goal as understood in capability and empowerment (Press Information Bureau).
- 3. Proliferate the Publics of Women:** The networks of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have shown that they are able to produce and use civic skills and have the wherewithal to make democratic claims (Prillaman 4). This needs political validation and protection from political externalities and democracy should properly invest in such networks.

8. CONCLUSION

The 2024 Indian general election illustrates that the phenomenon of the increased female election candidates is gaining widespread visibility. The increasing participation of women in politics has become a pole of rivalry of electoral politics and a site of assessment of governance achievement. The gender contradiction, women being clearly politically, as public voters and as the legions of the welfare state, yet politically unrepresented as contestants and female legislators, is a larger issue.

The disputes are about the essence of empowerment, in the context of feminist political theory, in terms of benefit attribution to women as the issue; the means to gain are

identification, voice, agency, and choice (Kabeer; Fraser). In the context of electoral sociology, the story is about the requisitioning of networks and political rivalry structured around daily governance outcomes (Rai; Prillaman).

Conceptually, gender turns untested in feminism democracy as a dual contradiction and enigma. If India's envisioned socio-economic development 's purpose is to extend democratic investments in female agency, socio-economically, then electoral politics should shift from the trope of defending women to the praxis of political power sharing with women. Otherwise, the gender turn will remain a contrived phenomenon, with the desired political outcomes of democracy unfulfilled.

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