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### Abstract:

*This paper explores the significant contributions of women in Indian politics, highlighting their pivotal roles from the pre-independence period to the present. Women played an instrumental role in the Indian freedom struggle, with leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Aruna Asaf Ali setting a precedent for future generations. Post-independence, women like Indira Gandhi and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur paved the way for women's participation in politics. Despite constitutional measures like the 73rd and 74th Amendments, which ensured women's reservation in local governance, challenges such as patriarchy, violence, and limited access to education continue to restrict women's full participation. The paper also discusses case studies of prominent women leaders such as Indira Gandhi and J. Jayalalithaa, focusing on their leadership, political strategies, and impact. The research emphasizes the need for greater representation and the dismantling of social barriers to enhance women's political empowerment in India.*

**Keywords:** Women in Indian Politics, Political Empowerment, Indira Gandhi, J. Jayalalithaa, Women's Reservation, Social Barriers.

### Introduction-

India is the largest democracy in the world. India has witnessed upheavals and development in the political scenario from the pre-independence period. Women in pre-independent India played an important role in the freedom struggle. Their courage, leadership and enthusiasm was kept alive after independence by upholding the principle of political equality among men and women in the Indian Constitution. Essentially this means equal right to vote and equal representation of all citizens in political offices. This basically has the idea of "one vote, one value", where there shall be no discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, sex, gender etc. It aimed political empowerment of women. Political empowerment of women means women should have a crucial role in the power structure of the society. It is observed that irrespective of the challenges, women have showcased their extraordinary contribution in the political landscape of the country from the pre-independence period till today. This paper aims to highlight the contributions of women in Indian politics, stressing their difficulties, accomplishments and influence on the political narrative of the country. This paper supports greater participation and representation of women in the political set up of the country.

### Historical Background-

During India's freedom struggle women had responded to Mahatma Gandhi's call to defy societal norms and fight for the greater cause of freedom. Women like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Aruna Asaf Ali, Suchita Kriplani, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Bhikaji Rustom Cama, Hansa Mehta, Sarla Devi Chaudhari among others were in the forefront of the freedom struggle. These women became leaders and an example for the other women in the society. Mahatma Gandhi advocated women's participation in the freedom movement. He wrote, "Women is the companion of man gifted with mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of man and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he.... By sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have."

-Young India, 26 February 1918

The post independence period also witnessed women's participation in politics. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was the Health Minister in Nehru's cabinet in 1952. This illustrates that women are a part of the Union Council of Ministers of India from the First Lok Sabha in 1952. Later in 1988,

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi felt the need to legally establish the Panchayati raj Institutions and to ensure women's reservation.

Consequently, the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Acts of 1992 constitutionally recognized the reservation of 1/3<sup>rd</sup> seats for women in the panchayats and municipalities. Thus, women's reservation was constitutionally in Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies. But there was no constitutional provision for women's reservation in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies. The need was felt for the same and the 106<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 2023 was introduced, which makes provision for reservation of one-third of all seats for women in Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies and the Legislative Assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, incorporating those reserved for SCs and STs.

National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2021 provides equal access to women to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation (E-Pathshala MHRD pg.3)

These initiatives are milestones contributing to the growth and development of women's participation in the political landscape of the country.

### **Women's Representation in Indian Politics-**

Notwithstanding the various initiatives undertaken to enhance women's political participation, it is seen that significant progress remains uncertain. Women continue to face considerable challenges and remain underrepresented in the political sphere.

After the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill, 2023 also known as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, the first election that happened was the 2024 Lok Sabha general elections.

In general, the percentage of women members in the Lok Sabha has shown rising graph from 5-10% till 2004 to 13.6% in 2024 and 13% in the Rajya Sabha. But when compared with the 17<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha, 2024 saw slight decline in the number of women Members of Parliament(MPs).

**17<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (2019-2024): 78 women MPs (highest)**

**18<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (2024- Present): 74 women MPs**

Rising graph is also seen in the number of women contesting elections in the last 15 years. In 1957 Lok Sabha, only 45 women candidates were contesting elections and in 2024 799 women candidates contested elections. West Bengal leads the nation in electing women MPs, with 11 representatives. The Trinamool Congress has 38% women MPs in the 2024 Lok Sabha, which is the highest. However, this is below the global average of 25%.

### **Women's Representation in State Legislatures-**

The national average for women in state legislature assemblies is only 9%, reflecting a severe underrepresentation. No state has achieved even a 20% female legislative presence. Despite having the highest percentage of women MLAs, Chhattisgarh still falls short, with only 18% female representation.

### **Global Context-**

With a ranking of 143 out of 185 countries, India lags behind in terms of women's representation in the lower house of Parliament. India is lagging in gender representation compared to countries like Vietnam, the Philippines, Pakistan and China.

### **Challenges faced by Women in Indian Politics-**

Women's participation in the political field is restricted due to the following social and cultural factors-

1. Patriarchal Society- For generations women are considered inferior to men in every aspect. This perception of looking towards women doesn't allow them to show their leadership skills and restricts their political participation.
2. Violence and Abuse- Often women are victims of sexual violence at home and at work places. Many a times sexual violence goes unpunished because it is believed that violence within marriage is not against the law. Violence and abuse shatters the morale and spirit of women and earns disrespect in the society. It makes it difficult for them to speak in public. It decreases their self confidence and affects their political participation.

3. **Discrimination-** It is seen that women are denied equal access to resources and information. They have to depend solely on their family member and village people for the resources and information. This adversely affects their leadership quality.
4. **Lack of Access to Education-** India has the largest number of illiterate people in the world with over 25% population still uneducated.(Times of India – 14 Aug 2022). As per 2018 figures male literacy rate was 82.4% and female literacy rate was 65.8%. The wide gender gap is evident from these figures. Lack of education makes it difficult for women to understand things and political system, which restricts their participation in the decision-making processes.
5. **Lack of Financial Independence-** Lack of education leads to lack of financial independence. Women are caught in a vicious circle for their financial needs. They have to depend on their fathers, brothers, husbands and later sons for financial support. This restricts them from taking decisions independently and participating in politics.

**Case Studies-**The following are the case studies of women who shaped India.

## 1. **Indira Gandhi- A Legacy of Leadership**

Indira Gandhi, often called the “Iron Lady” of India, was a towering figure in the Indian Politics. Her life and career were a testament to courage, conviction and a deep commitment to the nation’s progress.

### **Early Life and Political awakening-**

Even as a child, Indira Gandhi displayed a strong sense of purpose. At the age of thirteen when she was denied the membership of the Congress party, she refused to be deterred. Instead, she formed her own youth organization called “Vanar Sena”, reflecting the early spirit of defiance and activism.

### **The Path to Leadership-**

Indira’s dedication to freedom struggle led her to imprisonment of thirteen months during the Quit India Movement. This experience further solidified her commitment to the cause of Indian independence.

### **Prime Minister and Defining Moments-**

Indira Gandhi assumed the office of Prime Minister at a critical juncture in India’s history. The nation was grappling with severe famine and she took decisive steps to address the crisis. Her tenure as Prime Minister witnessed several defining moments for Indira-

- i. **Green Revolution-** This landmark initiative transformed Indian agriculture, leading to increased food production and alleviating widespread hunger.
- ii. **Nationalization of Banks-** It aimed to expand credit and promote equitable economic growth.
- iii. **Creation of Bangladesh-** Indira Gandhi played a crucial role in supporting the independence of Bangladesh.
- iv. **Pokhran Nuclear Test-** This landmark event established India as a nuclear, enhancing the strategic position on the global stage.

### **Challenges and Controversies-**

The declaration of emergency in 1975 remains a controversial period in Indian history.

Her leadership, limitless courage and unwavering commitment to the nation’s progress continue to inspire generations of Indians.

## 2. **J. Jayalalithaa- A Political Enigma**

### **Early Life and Political Entry-**

Jayalalithaa a charismatic figure, entered politics by joining AIADMK in 1982. MGR, the then Chief Minister, appointed her as propaganda secretary, launching her political career.

### **Inheritance of MGR’s Legacy-**

Following MGR’s demise, Jayalalithaa inherited his political legacy, becoming leader of the AIADMK. This was a significant development as a Brahmin leader headed a Dravidian party known for its anti-Brahmin ideology.

## Controversies and Authoritarian Style-

Her first term as Chief Minister(1991-1996) was marked by controversies and an authoritarian style of governance. This period witnessed instances of political violence against opponents and dissenters.

## Welfare Schemes and Focus on the Poor-

Despite controversies, Jayalalithaa implemented numerous welfare schemes aimed at improving the lives of the poor.

- i. Cradle Baby Scheme- This scheme addressed female infanticide and improved the sex ratio.
- ii. Amma Schemes- Introduced a range of affordable and accessible services like food, medicines and essential goods.
- iii. Focus on Women Empowerment- Launched initiatives like free gold for marriage, free laptops for students and breastfeeding rooms at bus stations.

## “Amma”- A Cult Personality-

Jayalalithaa cultivated a strong personal relation with the people, earning the affectionate title “Amma” (Mother). Her welfare schemes and charismatic personality transcended caste and religious divides, ensuring enduring popularity.

## A Unique Political Force-

Jayalalithaa defied traditional norms in male dominated politics. She built a strong political base without relying on traditional power structures. Despite facing numerous political challenges, she maintained a strong hold on power in Tamil Nadu.

In essence, Jayalalithaa was a complex and multifaceted figure. She was both admired for her welfare initiatives and criticized for her authoritarian tendencies. Her legacy remains a subject of debate, but her impact on Tamil Nadu’s politics is undeniable.

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