

Research Notes

Women in Indian Assembly Elections: A Study of Silent Voters

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Abstract: *The increasing participation of women in Indian assembly elections marks a significant transformation in the democratic landscape. In several states, women voter turnout has not only caught up with but often surpassed that of male voters, an electoral shift often described as the feminisation of Indian elections. However, this growing numerical presence conceals a deeper paradox of women representation and participation reaching new highs, yet their political voice and representation remain limited in certain ways. Strengthening women's independent political agency is crucial for translating their numerical voting strength into actual influence in policy and governance. The women voters as silent voters have shaped the electoral outcome and its dynamics. This paper therefore attempts to examine state level data, with a particular focus on the welfare scheme that surpassed the gendered dimensions- states like Delhi and Maharashtra. By analysing the political quietude that accompanies higher female turnout, the study questions whether the rise of the women voter has been accompanied by a rise in women political agency, or whether it remains a strategically mobilised but under recognised force in Indian democracy.*

Keywords: Elections, Feminisation, Silent Voters, Welfare Policies and Women Voters

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary politics, the politics of visibility crucially shapes perceptions and determines who is heard in power corridors and who remains marginalized. Elections as a channel of communication seeks to specify the millions of voices at a certain juncture of time. One of the objectives of election is to express one's politico-ideological choice through the voting process. As the historical backdrop of election is seen, the political landscape has not remained the same. The voter's voting preferences are determined by distinct factors that results in shaping the electoral politics of the nation. The study of the political beliefs of an individual advocates the making of the social bloc operative in the realms of politics. Thereby, the meaningful act of voting expresses the civic virtues of an accountability and transparency in ordinary life. Every voter participates with a strong conviction that his or her vote would attribute an instrumental value in the process of elections. The era of New India substantially addresses the power of women in multivariate domains of democracy. Women of 21st century have brought about a transformation in democratic politics while being specific in electoral politics of the States. Through their participation, representation and integration the mainstream politics have become women centric in devoting the policies and programmes for development and governance. Since 2014, one could see a phenomenal upsurge in the participation of the women voters in both Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections held so far. Realizing the salience of women participation, prowess and power, all the Union and State Governments across India have started addressing the concerns of women voters. From compliant voters during the first fifty years of Indian independence to women in the 21st century have turned out to be 'Silent Voters'.

The present paper is a sincere attempt to integrate the women voters as a catalyst for the change and how their role in elections have come to stimulate them as the "Silent voters" in specific to the latest Assembly elections held. The paper would lay emphasis upon how the political issues and narratives have transformed as per the utility gains of the political parties in the assembly elections of Delhi and Maharashtra. As the party stakeholders have started to create voter centric scheme which helps them to grasp a winnable position in the elections. Emerging as silent voters, women have sought to transform the electoral politics of many states. As a catalyst of new transition and transformation, women as Silent Voters in recently held Delhi and Maharashtra elections appeared to have steered the democratic polity towards a vibrant New India. Will all other

women follow suit in other states is to be seen in coming years!

METHODOLOGY

The paper will be looked upon through the Psephological approach to study the content analysis of the voting behaviour and political institutions drawn from the primary sources like political manifestoes of the political parties and newspapers and secondary sources such as the literatures on electoral politics and voting behaviour. Therefore, the study carries a qualitative outlook for understanding the women in assembly elections and their connotation as the silent voters.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Unpacking the gendered dynamics of electoral participation in state politics is the main concern, the electoral dynamics of Indian politics reflects the flexibility, fluctuations and floating relations amongst the multiparty political systems of the states and the centre. As one can see, the contemporary years are accelerating the growth of policy attention towards the women of the Indian electorate. From a higher female voter turnout in states to targeted welfare schemes such as *Ladli Behena Yojana Scheme* in Madhya Pradesh followed by other states. This reflects the gender dynamics in electoral politics where the female voter has overtaken the male voters across the states. The mainstream political parties have significantly acknowledged women as autonomous political actors and not just as passive dependents. (Gupta & Kumar, 2015) While this marks a democratic turning point, raising critical questions as; Are the participation upsurge translating into substantive political agency? Or does this “feminisation” mark a new form of political inclusion where women’s votes are counted while their static representation remains minimal?

Till the recent times, the feature of electoral politics reflects the believe that the women were disinterested in politics and they were a lack of political consciousness in them. However, the new political landscape shows an increasing participation, representation and integration of the women voters in the democratic politics. As researched the early 2000s observed women across the states- especially in rural areas and found out that the women lagged behind men in electoral participation. (Kumar, 2022) Whereas the women turnout narrowed the gap in the year 2009 with standing on 55.8 per cent to men’s 60.4 per cent. The rising female turnout was further mobilised with the help of an initiative taken place by the Election Commission’s SVEEP – Systematic Voters Education and Electoral Participation (Kumar, 2024). The gendered nature of electoral participation in the Indian state politics is extensively shaped by primordialism variables such as; caste and class, religion and region identities and rural and urban areas (Atri, 2022). So, the aggregate data often indicates a higher turnout among women in the rural constituencies, reducing the intra-gender disparities. While the numbers offer a sight of hope, the demographic and regional disparities still persist. Despite the urban – rural divide, an electoral disparity can be witnessed in the welfare-oriented schemes framed in order to mobilize the women voters (Kapoor & Ravi, 2014). The popularly famous schemes can be listed as; *Ujjwala Yojana*, *Ladli Behena*, *Free Bus ride for women* – all aim to resonate with women as beneficiaries

and voters. The women centric schemes have come to be labelled under the banner of women empowerment, playing an instrumental role in changing the dynamics of the electoral politics in states. (Sharma, Yadav & Sah, 2024) Somewhere, this reflects the term “instrumentalization of gender” wherein women support is solicited through a targeted benefits rather than moving towards a gender-just governance (Deshpande, 2004). Hence, the political stakeholders have aggressively co-opted the emerging female political force.

RESULTS

Voting behaviour, political quietude and the shifting role of women in Indian democracy in an intertwined study which reflects the real essence of a democratic governance. In the canvas of Indian electoral democracy, the ethos of politics lies in the core elements of its system. A system governed by the amalgamation of political and non-political actors. Looking from the perspective of the non-political actors viz. voters, one can identify a class or segment of new voters as the women and young voters who are established as the real catalyst in the electoral politics. The yesteryears of Indian politics in terms of voters and voting behaviour has undergone a transformation thereby reshaping the nature of democratic system. Reflecting the principle of ‘one person, one vote’, the democratic participation has upsurged in all the age brackets. One could see a phenomenal rise of electorates registered from 173.2 million to 980 million in the recently held elections. Specifically, if we look at the numbers of women, we can see a spectacular rise levelling up to 471 million. The steady rise in female electoral participation in the state politics marks a critical evolution in democratic engagement. Undoubtedly, gender is emerging as a decisive factor in the studies of political behaviour. In this context, Deshpande argues that, in the Indian elections women vote as an independent voter who makes her decision as per the political scenario nay just being a woman (Deshpande, 2009). On similar lines, Sanjay Kumar says that women do not intend to become a vote bank or vote en bloc like any other social blocs often do, rather their voting behaviour remains intertwined with the socio-economic issues same as the men voters. Looking at the voting behaviour of the women in the state politics, we found out that there are 19 states which recorded a higher turnout thereby surpassing the men. States like, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and many more (Rajput, 2023). This substantial shift is a shift of new variants of voters whose ballots tend to shape the electoral dynamics.

Silent yet strategic is the new politics in the women’s electoral quietude. Despite high turnout- women’s voting behaviour remains politically circumscribed. This entails for a strategic approach of voting quietly but seldomly contesting, protesting and engaging actively in the party politics. This prominent phenomenon can be termed as the “political quietude” of women shaped by the instrumentalization of gendered politics. Women voters are valued as the beneficiaries of the policies rather than as political agents. Their votes are polled through the welfare schemes that aims to reinforce the traditional roles as the caregivers or mothers.

The shifting strategies in Indian democracy have recognized the weightage of both the political parties as well as the women electorates. The roles vary and rely on the segmented approaches of containing welfare convergence, outreaching through the self-help groups and electoral literacy initiatives. First, the election commission started with the staffing of women under the “Sakhi polling booth” making it accessible, altered and admirable across the states. Second, the self-help groups have played a vital role in raising political awareness, demonstrating leadership skills, and entrepreneurship drives. Third, the welfare convergence came with a package deal for the political parties to lure the voters. They tend to package deal as per the essentialities of the electorates with a larger focus on the domestic infrastructure covering the utilities as cooking gas, water, electricity, housing etc. (Kumar, 2024). Last, the welfare schemes varied region to region, states to states with their own appeasement of votes. Such strategies brought a shore up in the electoral support thus transforming the pivotal role of women in the electoral politics in specific and democratic politics in general.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of Women’s Political Agency in Assembly Elections in the year 2024 had popularly known as the year of elections around the globe. The world had seen a tumultuous nature of politics varying from numbers of electorates to promising initiatives to forming alliances. Herein, the study would lay emphasis upon the reciprocation of the women’s political agency with the electoral outcomes we had, especially for the two recently assembly elections held in Maharashtra and Delhi. The electoral cycle of these states tends to offer a revealing snapshot of women’s evolving political agency at the subnational level (assembly level). The ratio of voter turnout in both the states showcases high female voting participation but also exposes constraints on women’s legislative representation and intra party influence. This contrast underscores that ballot participation alone does not guarantee substantive political power.

Turnout Trends: From Parity to Female Surges, if we look at the voting cycle of Maharashtra, the 2019 election recorded 59.21 per cent and in 2024 the women voting rose to 65.21 per cent. One can here see the women brought in a major difference while also narrowing the gender turnout gap to a mere. Clearly, the *Majhi LadkiBabin* (Cash transfer) scheme benefitted the party and accorded as a key catalyst (Pandit, 2024). *Visa vi* for the first time since the formation of the Legislative Assembly in 1993, Delhi in 2025 assembly election witnessed female turnout surpassing the male turnout. The data set the bar at 60.92 per cent marginally above men’s record of 60.21 percent in several constituencies. The Delhi assembly noticed the women clusters showing a robust engagement in the political activities.

Welfare Politics: Mobilisation vs Agency, both the well-known states magnificently utilized the targeted welfare to boost the voter turnout, nevertheless such schemes most of time reinforce dependency over autonomy. Like we say for Maharashtra’s *Majhi LadkiBabin* provided 1500/- per month ahead of the polls. The *Mukhyamantri Majhi LadkiBabin* yojana aimed at displaying empowerment and

liberation to the women in the state. And at the results say, the governing party has been credited for the achievement in mobilizing the female voters. On the other hand, in Delhi the basket of pledges was overwhelmed with the guarantees of free electricity, health services, stipends to poor women, bus ride. While these schemes effectively increase turnout, they anchor agency to state benevolence rather than civic empowerment.

A Symbolic Inclusion: From Ballot Bureau, the statistical achievements of women turnout have reshaped the nature of electoral politics. The electoral results of Maharashtra 2024 and Delhi 2025 present a paradox in nature where the women voters are increasingly visible at the ballot box yet remain underrepresented in legislatures and party hierarchies. In a way they tend to be silent no more as voters, but are voiceless as political contenders. However, the growing electoral engagement has translated the proportional representation or decision-making power. The welfare politics tend to reinforce a gendered perception of women as passive beneficiaries. And the transition from ballot to bureau is still underway to have full assertiveness on their electoral voice and enter the formal political structures. For the democratic politics to have a symbolic inclusion, the political participation of the women should equalize by the political representation – ensuring women as the political leaders and decision makers, not merely counted as voters. Therefore, the fabrication of Indian politics is and will continue to be reformulated by the gendered dynamics yet the electoral ascendancy would face its paradox.

The Idea of “Silent Voters” in Electoral Politics, the state level democratic processes are now being examined through the lens of an invisible influence of the women voters. This provides an analysis of women’s voting behaviour and representation in the electoral politics. The post 2014 elections have shown a growing awareness of the “silent feminisation” of the electorate, for those women who vote in high numbers yet remains politically marginalised in other domains. The term silent feminisation is taken from the understandings of the term “silent majority” which refers to an “an unspecified large group of people who do not express their opinion publicly” (Choudhary, 2018) and for the first time was heard in the campaigning speech of the US President Richard Nixon. So, the term silent voters have been extracted from his speech which has now become a substantive feature of electoral politics in India. In a more prescribed way, the idea of silent voters was theorised by the scholar Sunil K Choudhary in his one of the famously written books. He argues that the silent voters are the composition of majorly the women voters who votes on high scale but remain politically marginalized. They are the ones who rationally make up their minds whom they have to vote for on the very start of the election process (Choudhary, 2023). As examined the electoral politics in states, this kind of voter indicates the principle of being decisive without being expressive about their voting opinion. The silent voters are more assertive towards the political process rather than being submissive.

In the context of Maharashtra and Delhi assembly elections, the silent electorate especially the women voters have proven to be decisive and underrepresented in the

political power structures. The electoral system continues to treat women primarily as recipients of welfare schemes rather than as political leaders. Targeted policies like Maharashtra's *Majhi LadkiBahin* and Delhi's free bus rides for women are credited with influencing voting preferences. Ironically, what makes these voters "silent" is not their lack of participation, but the absence of corresponding political voice and institutional representation. Their influence is wielded at the ballot box, not in legislative debates or party leadership roles. Therefore, the understanding of the silent voters in electoral politics highlights a growing paradox in a democratic India. Herein, we must believe that the more women vote, the louder their silence in formal politics becomes.

CONCLUSION

India's evolving gendered dynamics of electoral participation reflect profound democratic gains. Unpacking gendered participation in the state assembly elections therefore requires moving beyond numerical indicators. The electioneering process involves interrogating the underlying structures that shapes access to representation, political engagements and formulation of policies or schemes. As the political parties increasingly view women as a decisive electoral bloc, there is a need to push the conversation from participation to representation and visibility to voice. Only when women's political quietude is replaced by genuine empowerment across all echelons of democracy will India's promise of inclusive governance be realized.

The new India in the 21st century is going to be popularly driven by women who devotes towards a better governance. Emerging as catalyst of change, the silent voters have redefined the electoral politics of several states through their massive participation in the democratic politics. Silent feminisation in Maharashtra and Delhi have fuelled the electoral polity towards a women led India.

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