

Chapter Eight

Iron Ladies: Evaluating the Struggle Against Hegemony for Political Empowerment of Women in India

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The journey of political empowerment of women in India has been extended, drawn out and arduous. Women participated in large numbers during the freedom struggle. However, they retreated from public life and remained forgotten in the larger frame of governance post-independence. The skewed demographic reports and population control needs again brought the women's question to the fore. The efforts put in by women's organisations and activists, as well as the impact of liberal education, have all positively impacted women's emancipation. The reservation of seats in local self-governance has been a game changer of sorts. In 18 states, women represent more than 50% of the population. For representation in the Parliament and State Legislatures, it took 27 years to be accepted finally. The law of women's reservation gets implemented after the next census. India has several Iron ladies who have left a lasting legacy. In a male-dominated sphere, they have prevailed and made a mark.

Keywords: iron ladies, women's question, patriarchy, political empowerment, women's organisations, gender, women's reservation

Introduction

The struggle against patriarchal hegemony has been ongoing in India for centuries. Women are fenced in by a so-called 'family culture.' Under this culture of patriarchal submission, a woman is forced to accept an inferior position accorded to her since childhood. Women are required to remain within the social boundaries dictated by culture and customs. While these hegemonic practices have eroded to an extent as a result of persistent efforts towards women's emancipation and liberal

education, for women in India, there still is the unwritten rule to conform to societal expectations of marriage and behaviour.

History of Political Empowerment of Women in India

The political empowerment of women in India has been a long, arduous road. Several factors have shaped its course, namely social and religious movements, colonialism, the fight for independence, and constitutional changes. The Women's Question was first debated among social reformers of the 19th century. The question was then taken up by nationalists, and more recently, in the contemporary period, the question has engaged all concerned with issues of poverty, development, unemployment, and inequality. During India's colonial period, educated middle-class men realised that traditional customs, especially the treatment of widows, denial of education, and child marriages, were blots on the society, and they were anxious to usher in change (Mazumdar, 2010, pp. 14–16). The woman's question got intertwined mainly with India's national movement. As the freedom struggle evolved into a mass movement, leaders like Gandhi encouraged greater participation of women. During this time, the woman's question transformed into a political issue centred on equality.

The vision of a free Indian nation necessitated addressing the women's issue as a political question. (Mazumdar, 2010). The Indian Constitution granted women the right to education, franchise, entry into political offices, and public services. These reforms remained mainly on paper and failed to transform into reality. In the years after Independence, women's issues were once again relegated to the background, and women retreated from public life. Decades later, new compulsions began to engender renewed attention to the situation of women. These were concerns with demography that confounded legislators in the sixties and the growing issue of unemployment and poverty. Population control was the need of the hour. Women's status, lack of education and employment, and limited roles in the decision-making process were identified as the main stumbling blocks (Sinha, 1998, p. 12). The woman's question came to the fore again in the 1970s, when at the behest of the United Nations, the Ministry of Education and Social Welfare appointed the Committee on Status of Women in India (CSWI) in 1971, which was given the responsibility to study the current status of Indian women and submit a detailed report to the International Women's Year 1975 (Mazumdar, 2010, pp. 3–5).

The Committee found that women had faced increasing marginalisation in society and the economy. The report indicated a declining sex ratio, as well as a growing disparity in life expectancy, but also a significant gap in access to literacy, livelihood, and education. The vision as envisaged in the Constitution was far from achieved. The tools of political rights, education and equality in legal matters that would resolve women's issues had remained outside the reach of most women. Even while a minority had benefited from education and political rights, they had made a diminutive impact on weakening the hold of patriarchal subservience (Mazumdar, 2010).

This heightened sense of right and wrong triggered by the Emergency was another propelling factor that spotlighted women. The issue that caught women's ire across the nation was the crimes of violence. These were seen as manifestations of women's marginalisation and devaluation. Women's organisations focused on various issues that came to the fore, and several of them committed to the emancipation of poor rural and urban women. The women's question since the 1990s has no longer been limited to the status of Indian women in the family or the right to equality in society (Alexander et al., 2017, p. 34). This has become a part of the larger question directed towards the change that Indian society was undergoing regarding socio-economic, political, and intellectual perception and the analysis of that process.

In recent years, attempts towards gender equity and enhancement of the role of women in the decision-making processes have ensured the political empowerment of Indian women. Dynamic women have emerged on the political scene. Women in both the federal and state governments occupy important ministerial posts. At the grassroots level, women have also become a part of governance through the Panchayati Raj. Women's involvement in the political process is not just visible but downright impactful. The women's question can no longer be ignored in India, and successive governments have focused on women-centric schemes.

Participation of women in politics remained relatively insignificant even four decades after independence. The realisation dawned that women constituted yet another disadvantaged group, and they needed preferential consideration in political representation. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution, which came into force in 1993, mandated 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions (PRI) and urban local bodies (Singh, 2004, p. 67). With this very sig-

nificant constitutional amendment, women could enter the sphere of governance. Women's participation, which had been pegged at 4–5% earlier, rose to 25 to 40%. According to the governmental data, as of September 2021, there are at least 18 states where the percentage of women in PRI is more than 50%.

An unprecedented amount of women's representation in local governance is not just a quantitative change. However, reports speak of several success stories where women's participation has resulted in improved local governance. However, the system has several inherent weaknesses. Studies have revealed that women were often not informed or invited to the meetings of the Gram Sabha. Some women were hesitant about meeting because of the presence of village elders or were reluctant to attend meetings as it would entail a loss of the day's wages or neglect of household chores. Women who were elected president were often illiterate and from better-off families who did not need to work outside their homes. The only reason to contest elections was the pressure their husband or father-in-law put on them. Their families and communities also drove their decisions (Shashi & Sahni, 2009, pp. 29–33).

The gender composition of the Lok Sabha has been disappointing. In India's first Lok Sabha, women made up 4.41% of the strength. It crossed 10% in 2009 and peaked at 14.36% in 2019. In the recent elections of 2024, the percentage has dipped to 13.63%. Had the growth been linear, India would have had around 30% women members of parliament (MP). Any casual observer can see that the numbers are disproportionate to the population of women and that of women's political aspirations. India lags behind the global average of 26.5%. In Central and South Asian countries, the average representation of women is 19%. South Africa has 46% of women MPs; the United Kingdom has 35% of women MPs, and the United States of America has 29% of women MPs.

The bill to reserve 33% of seats in the Parliament was first introduced in 1996. The Indian Parliament that year had 7.37% women. Patriarchs claimed that India did not have 'enough capable women' to fill the reservation. In 2021, the National Federation of Indian Women filed a PIL. The government failed to respond for two years, and only after being rebuked by the Supreme Court did it take up the matter in the Parliament. Twenty-seven years after the idea was mooted, the Women's Reservation Bill was finally passed in the Parliament in September 2023. This legislation will be enforced after the next census. Ideas have

been mooted to extend it to the Upper House and the reservation for women within political parties.

An evaluation of the voter turnout in the elections of 2024 indicated that women's turnout outpaced that of men in 19 out of the 36 states and union territories (Jain, 2024). However, at the national level, men had a slightly higher turnout rate of 65.8% than women's 65.7%. Out of 8,360 candidates who contested elections this year, less than 10% were women. According to the data, 797 women contested the elections in 2024 (Sengupta, 2024).

Seventy-four women have been elected members of Parliament. Some of them are veteran politicians, and 41% (i.e., 30) have been Lok Sabha members earlier. The more significant percentage, i.e., 43, are first-time MPs, which indicates the growing aspirations of Indian women. 16% of the 74 are below the age of 40. Some of the women elected are very young. Priya Saroj of the Samajwadi Party and Shambhavi Choudhury of the BJP are 25 years old, and Iqra Choudhury of the Samajwadi Party is 29 years old. The average age of the women MPs is 50, which is lower than that of men, which stands at 56.78. Again, this indicates that younger women want a say in the nation's direction of growth.

Despite advancements, patriarchal views, violence against women, restricted access to various resources, education, and deeply ingrained societal norms are just a few of the obstacles that Indian women still confront on their path to political empowerment. These difficulties are exacerbated by intersectional inequality based on aspects of caste, religion, class, and ethnicity. In India, empowering women for politics is complex and calls for coordinated efforts by the government, major political parties, civil society, and the community. Even though tremendous progress has been accomplished, ongoing efforts are required to remove any remaining obstacles and guarantee gender parity in political representation and decision-making.

Iron Ladies: Historical Context

The phrase 'iron ladies' is frequently used to characterise influential and well-known women in politics, especially when they defy gender stereotypes and establish their dominance in areas that men typically control. Gender relations in India have a complicated past, with firmly ingrained patriarchal standards. Despite this, India has produced some amazing women politicians who have broken prejudices

and motivated others to become empowered. In addition to societal expectations, discrimination, and violence, women in the Indian political scenario face several challenges. The political empowerment of Indian women may be impeded by structural obstacles such as restricted access to political networks, economic resources, and education. Strong leadership traits like tenacity, grit, and boldness are frequently displayed by Iron Ladies in Indian politics (Jharta, 1996, p. 20). They manoeuvre through a political environment dominated by men, frequently using charm, savvy alliances, and negotiation abilities to further their goals.

Women leaders in India have led the way in several policy measures that seek to improve women's rights, combat gender inequity, and advance social justice. Their impact goes beyond symbolic representation to actual policy results that help women and underrepresented groups. Perceptions of women in politics can be influenced by how Iron Ladies are portrayed in the media and in public discourse. Gender biases and stereotypes may affect how their leadership is viewed. Women are frequently subjected to criticism and scrutiny that their male counterparts may not experience. Aspiring Indian women leaders look up to Iron Ladies as inspiration and role models. Their inspiring tales defy gender stereotypes and encourage more women to pursue political careers, broadening the potential political leaders' pool.

It is critical to acknowledge that intersecting identities, like caste, class, religion, and geography, influence women's experiences in politics (Sinhā, 2000, p. 23). Compared to their wealthier counterparts, Iron Ladies from marginalised communities could encounter more obstacles and difficulties. Women leaders' support from institutions, political parties, and civil society organisations determines how successful they are in gaining political empowerment. In particular, analysing the Iron Ladies' struggle for political hegemony in India entails evaluating the obstacles encountered, the leadership styles demonstrated, the influence of policies, public opinion, and the role played. Even though women have made significant progress in Indian politics, fundamental change in attitudes is still necessary to accomplish true equality as well as empowerment.

Iron Ladies of India

Smt. Indira Gandhi

The first Indian female Prime Minister, Smt. Indira Gandhi had a profound influence on both politics and society. During her time, she ac-

completed a number of noteworthy deeds. In 1966, during political unrest in India, she became Prime Minister and demonstrated strong leadership amid the chaos. In 1969, nationalising large banks was one of Indira Gandhi's primary economic initiatives. Indira Gandhi's government led the Green Revolution to boost agriculture by adopting quality and high-yielding crop varieties, contemporary irrigation techniques, and harmless agricultural fertilisers in the 1960s and 1970s. This programme was essential in turning India from a food-deficit country into an agricultural powerhouse that could feed itself (Duda, 2006, p. 189).

The most important foreign policy accomplishment of Indira Gandhi was India's intervention in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. The Indian nuclear programme was initiated by Indira Gandhi, who also laid the foundation for the nation's nuclear capabilities. The programme helped India become a nuclear power and significantly influenced the nation's strategic posture despite facing international condemnation and sanctions.

One of the most contentious moments of Indira Gandhi's presidency was her 1975 declaration of a state of emergency, which suspended civil freedoms and concentrated authority in the hands of the government. Following the Emergency, Indira Gandhi faced defeat in the general elections of 1977 (Bhushan, 2018, pp. 181–194). However, she mounted a political comeback, leading the Congress party to victory in the 1980 elections. Her return to power proved her continued political tenacity and appeal to some sections of the Indian public.

The complicated legacy of Indira Gandhi is still being discussed in India. While she is praised for her strong leadership, contributions to economic growth, and attempts to improve India's standing internationally, her authoritarian inclinations and divisive policies, like the Emergency, have also drawn much criticism (Ertan et al., 2018, p. 125). She is still regarded as the most significant woman in contemporary Indian history for her exceptional accomplishments and enduring influence on Indian politics.

J. Jayalalitha

Jayalalitha, popularly known as *Amma* (a Tamil term meaning Mother), was a well-known Indian politician and actress. She had served several terms as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, a state in the south. Her charismatic, controversial, and populist political career profoundly affected Tamil Nadu politics and society. Under the guidance of well-

known actor M. G. Ramachandran (MGR), the founder of the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) party, Jayalalitha entered politics in the 1980s. She was adept at navigating the party's inner workings after MGR's death in 1987, emerging as his political heir and ultimately taking over as general secretary. One of the pioneer women in South Indian politics was Jayalalitha. She broke down gender boundaries and encouraged many women to seek leadership positions in public life as the first female Chief Minister (Shukla, 2007, p. 127).

She implemented several laws designed to empower women, including those that supported self-help organisations for economic empowerment and provided women with financial support for marriage. A hallmark of Jayalalitha's time as Chief Minister was her emphasis on populist social programmes meant to reduce poverty and raise the living standards of underprivileged groups. Her government implemented programmes including 'Amma pharmacies,' which provided affordable medications to the underprivileged, and 'Amma canteens,' which provided subsidised food distribution. In Tamil Nadu, Jayalalitha prioritised infrastructure development by allocating funds for initiatives like road networks, bridges, and urban amenities. The quality of education and healthcare services was enhanced, especially in rural regions, by significant investments made in infrastructure for these sectors under Jayalalitha's leadership (Sadik, 2022, p. 232).

Jayalalitha's administration implemented legal changes to enhance governance and battle corruption. Several initiatives were implemented to improve the administration's efficiency and transparency, including creating special courts to handle corruption cases more quickly and deploying online technologies for government services. Jayalalitha is a prominent person in Indian politics because of her lasting appeal to specific sections of the Tamil Nadu voter base and her significant contributions to the welfare and development of the state (Kaṇēcaṅ, 1996, p. 5).

Kiran Bedi

Kiran Bedi has had a notable career as the Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry, in addition to her role as an officer in the Indian Police Service (IPS). In 1972, Kiran Bedi became the first female member of the Indian Police Service. As Delhi's Deputy Commissioner of Police (Traffic), she implemented various cutting-edge strategies to enhance traffic control and lessen congestion. By strengthening community policing

and involving locals, she successfully decreased the crime rate in West Delhi during her time as DCP.

As Inspector General of Prisons, she significantly changed Tihar Jail, the largest jail facility in India. Her programmes significantly improved the living conditions and opportunities for rehabilitation of the prisoners by incorporating yoga, meditation, education, and vocational training. She also established the Navjyoti India Foundation, a non-governmental organisation that works to improve the lives of the underprivileged and combat drug consumption (Bedi, 2022, pp. 7–12).

As the Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry (2016–2021), Kiran Bedi concentrated on raising the transparency and efficiency of administration. She ensured that the public could more easily access government services and supported digital governance. Several projects to enhance Puducherry's water conservation and management were started under her direction. This included encouraging rainwater collection, desilting bodies of water, and involving the local community in water conservation initiatives. Making Puducherry water-rich was one of her most essential achievements. The collaborative governance model brought in CSR helps to desilt channels (Bedi, 2023). She tried to upgrade hygienic and medical amenities and spearheaded projects to reduce waste, promote hygienic behaviours, and maintain cleanliness. Bedi launched initiatives to improve educational standards and give young people access to vocational training, emphasising the value of education and skill development. She ensured that government initiatives reached the most disadvantaged segments of society by actively supporting initiatives that targeted the empowerment of women and marginalised populations. In order to improve the general well-being of the community, Bedi promoted projects aimed at getting young people involved in sports and physical activity.

Kiran Bedi's career has been distinguished by her dedication to serving the public, her influence on the many fields in which she has worked, and her setting of high standards for administration and public service.

Mayawati

Mayawati is a well-known Indian politician who has substantially impacted the empowerment of marginalised populations in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Among her supporters, she is affectionately called *Behenji*, a Hindi word meaning Sister. A significant accomplishment in

and of itself is Mayawati's ascent to prominence in Indian politics as a spokesperson for the underprivileged people. Uttar Pradesh, one of India's most populated and powerful states, has had her as its Chief Minister for four different periods. During her term, any Indian state's highest executive post was held by a woman from a marginalised part of society for the first time.

In order to strengthen Dalit support, Mayawati's political strategy frequently employs 'social engineering,' which focuses on forming electoral alliances across caste lines (Bose, 2009). Her political base has grown, and she has won elections by skilfully forming coalitions with other social groupings, such as Brahmins and other non-Dalit castes.

Mayawati carried out several programmes throughout her terms as Chief Minister to further the welfare and self-determination of Dalits and other marginalised groups. These programmes involved the creation of Dalit-specific housing developments, healthcare facilities, and educational institutions. Additionally, she prioritised having Dalits represented in public institutions and government jobs (Bose, 2009, pp. 237–247). Even in the face of criticism and controversy, including accusations of corruption and misappropriation of public funds, Mayawati has shown political tenacity and remained a dominant force in Uttar Pradesh politics for several decades.

Mayawati's distinctive achievements lie in her efforts to empower Dalits and other underprivileged populations, her political perseverance, and her ability to challenge entrenched power structures in Indian politics. Her contributions to social justice and empowerment have had a long-lasting effect on Indian society, notwithstanding the controversies surrounding her legacy.

Mamta Banerjee

Mamata Banerjee, a well-known Indian politician and the architect of the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC) party, is referred to as Didi, which means elder sister in Hindi. Since taking office in 2011, she has led West Bengal as Chief Minister and has had a significant influence on the political and economic condition of the region. One of Mamata Banerjee's most significant accomplishments was ending West Bengal's 34-year communist domination in 2011. This heralded a new era of government under her direction and was a significant political shift in the state's history (Banerjee & Sengupta, 2012, p. 42).

During her time as Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee has priori-

tised economic reforms and industrial development in West Bengal. She has also implemented numerous social welfare programmes to reduce unemployment, poverty, and social inequality in West Bengal. Programmes like the *Khadya Sathi* scheme, which offers subsidised food grains to low-income households, and the *Kanyashree* scheme, which promotes girls' education and empowerment, have benefited millions and won international praise. She has been a steadfast supporter of women's empowerment and their rights, proposing various laws and initiatives to promote women's equality and shield women from abuse and exploitation. Her government has prioritised increasing connectivity and accessibility throughout the state to promote economic development and prosperity (Mitra, 2014, p. 12).

Mamata Banerjee has shown political tenacity and sustained her appeal among sections of the West Bengal electorate despite challenges from opposition parties and criticism regarding matters like law and order, political violence, and governance. Her ability to mobilise public support has helped her retain power in the state. The distinctive accomplishments of Mamata Banerjee are seen in her attempts to empower marginalised people in West Bengal, advance economic development, and effect political reform. She is well-known in Indian politics thanks to her grassroots activism, emphasis on social welfare, and leadership style (Mitra, 2014).

Nirmala Sitharaman

Nirmala Sitharaman has served in several critical capacities within the government, most notably as the Minister of Defence and the Minister of Finance. In 2017, Nirmala Sitharaman was named India's first female Minister of Defence 2017. This nomination demonstrated the growing presence of women in senior government roles and broke down gender boundaries in the historically male-dominated defence area.

As the Minister of Finance from 2019 to 2021, Sitharaman led several significant economic reforms to strengthen India's economy. These changes included lowering corporate taxes to encourage investment, enacting the Goods and Services Tax (GST) to simplify indirect taxes, and implementing several initiatives to support small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) and the agriculture industry (Taxmann, 2021, p. 35).

While serving as Finance Minister, Sitharaman was instrumental in developing the government's response to the COVID-19 outbreak and

its economic effects. She unveiled several relief initiatives and economic stimulation plans to assist companies, labourers, and vulnerable groups impacted by the pandemic's lockdowns and economic slowdown (Taxmann, 2021).

As Minister of Defence, Sitharaman concentrated on modernising India's armed forces and bolstering the country's defence capabilities. She promoted increased defence budgets, technical advancements, and strategic alliances to improve India's security position and fend off new security threats. Her diplomatic initiatives have contributed to advancing India's strategic goals globally and strengthened its international standing. Sitharaman has advocated for social welfare and economic inclusion throughout her professional life (Nageswaran & Natarajan, 2019, p. 17). Her leadership and efforts have profoundly impacted India's strategic and economic landscape.

Mahua Moitra

Prominent Indian politician Mahua Moitra is well-known for her passionate remarks in the Indian Parliament and outspoken support of various causes. In the general elections 2019, Mahua Moitra was chosen to serve as a Member of Parliament. She is the representative for West Bengal, India's Krishnanagar constituency. Mahua Moitra became well-known for her forceful statements in the Indian Parliament, where she expressed her opinions on topics including secularism, human rights, democracy, and the freedom of speech. Her speeches are praised for their forcefulness, eloquence, and clarity in holding the administration accountable.

Moitra has been outspoken in her criticism of the deterioration of democratic norms and authoritarian inclinations in Indian politics (Bhattacharjee, 2023, p. 23). She has called attention to what she perceives as a growing tendency of authoritarianism in the nation, voicing concerns about the expansion of majoritarianism, attacks on dissent, and challenges to democratic institutions. Mahua Moitra has been a steadfast supporter of women's rights. She has made statements opposing violence against women, discrimination based on gender, and the underrepresentation of women in elected office and positions of authority. She is an inspiration to aspiring female leaders as a female politician in a field dominated by men.

Moitra has stressed the significance of inclusive development strategies and social justice. In order to improve marginalised populations

and provide equitable chances for all, she has pushed for policies to address poverty, inequality, and social marginalisation (Bhattacharjee, 2023). Concerned about climate change and environmental degradation, Moitra has called for immediate action to reduce the effects of global warming and safeguard the ecosystem. Her popularity and effectiveness as a legislator are primarily attributed to her accessibility and responsiveness to the interests of the people she represents. Among Mahua Moitra's notable accomplishments are her support of human rights and democratic principles, promotion of social justice and women's rights, and interaction with voters (Thapar, 2023, p. 67). She is a well-known figure in Indian politics and an advocate for progressive ideas and ideals.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Caste, class, religion, and geography are examples of intersecting identities that influence women's experiences in the Indian political scenario. The various obstacles that women from marginalised communities must overcome to participate in and be represented in politics are compounded. Initiatives targeting these intersectional disparities must be implemented to advance women's empowerment. In India, the sources of gender equality and political empowerment of women have been abetted by several civil society organisations, feminist groups, and women's rights campaigners. These movements have brought attention to problems, including discrimination, violence against women, and the need for more representation in decision-making bodies. The dynamic interplay of struggles, accomplishments, and ongoing challenges is reflected in the historical backdrop of the political empowerment of women in India. Even though there has been some progress, reaching complete equality and inclusiveness is still a work in progress that will take time and can only be achieved through cooperation from the public sector, the business community, and civil society.

Indian women have faced an uphill struggle against hegemonic practices for centuries. While urban educated women have been largely liberated from the structures of the traditions, gender equality remains a distant dream. Primary education for women is at an average of 71%, but there are regional disparities, and the school dropout rate for girls is still high. While several legislations have been implemented to protect women, unless there is a change in the patriarchal mindset of the population, these legislations are ineffective. With women joining lo-

cal governance in large numbers and eventually with reservation in the parliament and state legislatures, pro-women changes in Indian society will hopefully evolve.

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