

Women's Political Engagement in Urban Local Bodies: A Brief Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Women, being half of the world's population, are successfully claiming their stake in almost all facets of lives competing with their counterparts and contributing to the development and sustainability of the communities they are living in. Engagement of women in direct politics is not an exemption to it. In light of rapid urbanization, constitutional promises, and reservations, they are stepping into the political platform in the local bodies and thereby becoming key actors in decision-making. India being the world's largest democracy needs a strong local government which is only possible with the inclusion of the sections of the society including women, whose entry, enlightenment, and empowerment in politics is not just different but is a difficult story when compared to men. A peep into this history is also the story of the elements that have facilitated or hindered the active role of women, especially in Urban Local Bodies-ULBs that are changing the face of a nation with ample scope for development that requires effective participation of the executives where women's role is very vital. This paper is an attempt to map the women's political participation in ULBs in India from a historical perspective.

Keywords: Political Participation, Representation, ULB, Women

1. Introduction

Women's political participation is a key indicator of inclusive and sustainable development, reflecting how women can exercise their agency and influence in the public sphere¹. Women's involvement in politics is essential to ensure that policies and governance are responsive to the needs and interests of both genders and that they contribute to the social and economic well-being of the whole society². However, women's political participation is a matter of representation at the national level and empowerment at the local level, where decisions affect citizens' everyday lives³. Local governments, such as municipal corporations, councils, and panchayats, are the backbone of any nation's self-reliance and development, as they are responsible for delivering essential services, planning infrastructure, managing resources, and promoting social justice⁴. Therefore, women's political engagement in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) is crucial to democratic decentralization and gender equality.

India has a long and rich history of women's participation in various spheres of life, including politics. From ancient times, women have played significant roles as rulers, warriors, reformers, and leaders in different regions and periods of Indian history⁵. Some of the notable examples are Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi, Rani Ahilyabai Holkar of Indore, Rani Chennamma of Kittur, Rani Rudramma Devi of Warangal, Razia Sultana of Delhi, Nur Jahan of Mughal Empire, and many others⁶. These women defied their times' patriarchal norms and stereotypes and demonstrated their courage, wisdom, and vision in governing their territories and people.

The colonial era and subsequent societal and political transformations in India significantly undermined the status and rights of women, particularly within the public sphere. Women encountered various forms of discrimination, oppression, and violence, systematically being deprived of equal opportunities in areas such as education, healthcare, property rights, and political involvement⁷.

Despite these challenges, the fight for Independence against British rule provided a platform for women to assert their identity and agency, prompting many to actively engage in the nationalist movement as activists, freedom fighters, and leaders. Influential figures like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kriplani, Kamala Nehru, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Annie Besant, and others emerged as prominent voices advocating not only for the nation's liberation but also for the emancipation of women from the constraints of tradition, custom, and law⁸.

Through their unwavering dedication and sacrifices, these women played a pivotal role in India's struggle for freedom, laying the foundation for the subsequent advancement of women's rights and empowerment in the post-independence era.

The dawn of Independence in 1947 brought a new era of democracy and development in India, which also recognized women's equal rights and status as citizens and voters.

The constitution of India, adopted in 1950, guaranteed equality, liberty, and justice to all and prohibited discrimination based on sex, caste, religion, or race⁹.

The constitution also granted universal adult suffrage, which enabled women to participate in the electoral process as voters and candidates. Additionally, the constitution set aside seats for women in local

bodies to augment their presence and involvement in grassroots governance. Nevertheless, the execution of this provision was delayed until the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment acts in 1992. These acts stipulated a 33 percent reservation for women in rural and urban local bodies¹⁰. These acts were hailed as a landmark step towards empowering women and strengthening democracy at the local level, as they created a space for women to enter the political arena as elected representatives of their communities despite the prevailing barriers and challenges.

The present paper aims to provide a historical perspective on women's journey into the governance of ULBs as political executives, tracing their roots from ancient times to the present. The paper will examine the evolution and transformation of women's political participation in India, focusing on the urban context, and analyse the factors that have facilitated or hindered their involvement in the ULBs. The paper will also highlight the achievements and challenges of women in the ULBs and suggest ways to enhance their role and impact in local governance.

2. Methodology

This paper adopts a descriptive research approach to analyse historical trends and patterns of women's

Table 1. Women's political participation in India: a historical timeline

Period	Status of Women
Ancient India	Women played significant roles as rulers, warriors, reformers, and leaders in different regions and periods of Indian history.
Medieval India	The status and rights of women saw a downturn due to the impact of foreign invasions, religious conservatism, and feudalistic systems. Women encountered discrimination, oppression, and violence, often being confined to domestic roles.
Colonial India	Women actively participated in the nationalist movement, assuming roles as activists, freedom fighters, and leaders. Their engagement extended beyond the fight for the country's independence, encompassing a broader struggle for the emancipation of women.
Post-independence India	Women attained equal rights and status as citizens and voters through the Indian constitution, which ensured equality, liberty, and justice for all. The Constitution explicitly prohibited discrimination based on sex, caste, religion, or race.
1992	The enactment of the 73 rd and 74 th Constitutional Amendment Acts mandated 33 percent reservation for women in rural and urban local bodies, respectively. This provision opened avenues for women to actively participate in the political sphere as elected representatives of their communities, overcoming prevailing barriers and challenges.

Source: Author's analysis

political engagement in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) across the globe. Descriptive methods are commonly utilized in Political Science to offer a holistic and comprehensive understanding of political phenomena, without necessarily testing causal hypotheses or making predictions¹¹. They rely on diverse data sources like official statistics, historical documents, media reports, surveys, interviews, and observations to describe and interpret the complexity and diversity of the political reality¹².

3. Data Sources and Analysis

The primary data source for this paper is the secondary literature on women's role in urban politics, drawn from academic journals, books, reports, and databases.

The review and synthesis of this existing literature focus on the following key aspects of women's political engagement in ULBs:

- **Historical evolution:** This includes tracing the development of women's political rights and representation in ULBs, from early suffrage movements to the present day. The analysis focuses on major milestones, challenges, and achievements across different regions and countries.
- **Current status and trends:** This section examines the current state and trends of women's political participation and leadership in ULBs. It includes the number and proportion of women elected and appointed to various positions (e.g., mayors, councillors, committee members, and department heads) and factors influencing their access and performance in urban governance.
- **Impact and outcomes:** The paper analyses the impact and outcomes of women's political engagement in ULBs, for both women themselves and the communities they serve. This emphasizes the policy areas and issues women prioritize, advocate for, and address in their political roles (e.g., social welfare, education, health, environment, and gender equality).

4. Research Aims and Contributions

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive and comparative overview of the historical and contemporary dynamics of women's political engagement in ULBs.

It also identifies remaining gaps and challenges in achieving gender parity and empowerment in urban politics. Additionally, the paper discusses implications and recommendations for enhancing women's political engagement in ULBs at both individual and institutional levels, while suggesting avenues for advancing research on this topic.

5. International Frameworks for Women's Political Engagement in ULBs: Paving the Path for Progress

The advancement of women's political engagement in urban local bodies (ULBs) has been significantly shaped by several pivotal international frameworks and milestones. These frameworks have served as catalysts for raising awareness, fostering collective action, and establishing legal obligations on member states to promote gender equality in political participation.

6. Waves of Feminism: Laying the Groundwork

Feminist movements across the globe have played a critical role in igniting change and paving the way for women's political engagement. The first wave, originating in the United States and spreading globally, challenged traditional gender roles and demanded equality in various spheres, including politics. The second wave furthered this call, advocating for equal political, economic, and social rights for women. The third wave continues to build on this legacy, highlighting the importance of women's political consciousness and active participation. These movements have raised awareness, mobilized action, and created fertile ground for international frameworks to take root.

7. Legal Instruments: Guaranteeing Equal Rights

Several key legal instruments on the international stage have played a pivotal role in enshrining the principle of women's equal rights to political participation. These instruments serve as foundational pillars for advocating and ensuring

gender equality in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). Here are some of the noteworthy legal instruments.

7.1 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) - 1948

- *Article 21:* This article guarantees the right to participate in government and public affairs without discrimination based on sex. The UDHR, a landmark document, emphasizes the fundamental rights and freedoms inherent to all individuals.

7.2 Convention on the Political Rights of Women - 1952

- This convention explicitly addresses women's political rights, ensuring their eligibility to vote, stand for election and hold public office. It represents an early international commitment to fostering women's active participation in political processes.

7.3 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) - 1966

Article 25: The ICCPR reiterates the equal right to vote and stand for election for all individuals, emphasizing non-discrimination based on sex. It underscores the principles of political equality and participation.

7.4 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) - 1979

CEDAW is a comprehensive convention that requires states to eliminate discrimination against women in all spheres, including political participation. Notably, it recognizes the significance of temporary special measures, such as quotas, to accelerate women's advancement in various domains.

These legal instruments collectively provide a robust framework for advancing the cause of women's equal participation in ULBs. They not only emphasize the fundamental rights of women but also hold states accountable for fostering an inclusive political landscape. The principles outlined in these instruments serve as benchmarks, guiding the development of national and local legislation aimed at promoting gender equality in political representation. The recognition of temporary

special measures acknowledges the need for proactive steps to address historical imbalances and accelerate progress toward gender parity in political arenas worldwide.

8. Global Policy Goals and Recommendations: Setting Expectations and Spurring Action

International development agendas have also played a crucial role in shaping the global landscape for women's political engagement. Key milestones include:

8.1 ECOSOC recommendations (1990s)

The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations recommended increasing the percentage of women in political positions to 30% by 1995 and 50% by 2000. This ambitious target served as a rallying cry for action and progress.

8.2 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)

This landmark document emphasized the need for increased participation of women in public office and called for governments to take concrete measures to achieve this goal. Subsequent reviews and updates reinforced this commitment.

8.3 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

MDG 3 aimed to promote gender equality and empower women, implicitly recognizing the importance of equal political representation.

8.4 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

SDG 5 calls for women's active participation in all decision-making levels, including political life. This reaffirms the ongoing commitment to gender equality in political participation.

These global policy goals and recommendations set expectations for national and local action, guide development efforts, and track progress toward gender equality in political participation.

9. From Ancient Roots to Constitutional Rights: A Historical Journey of Women's Engagement in Indian ULBs

Women's engagement in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in India is a fascinating story woven with threads of tradition, struggle, and progress. This journey, stretching from ancient to the present, reveals a complex interplay between historical context, evolving political structures, and the unwavering pursuit of women's empowerment.

10. Ancient Precedents and Early Participation

The roots of local governance in India can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization, where evidence suggests the presence of planned urban spaces with dedicated officials responsible for sanitation and infrastructure¹³. While historical accounts paint a picture of diverse roles played by women in administration during various eras, including figures like Goutami, Rani Rudrama, Rajiya Sulthana, and Noorjahan¹⁴, the colonial period witnessed a decline in their formal involvement.

10.1 The National Movement and the Seeds of Reservation

The Indian national movement was a crucial turning point, igniting women's political rights debates. While figures like Sarojini Naidu and Begum Shah Nawaz initially opposed reservations, fearing it could undermine demands for equal rights (Kumar, 1993), the Constituent Assembly ultimately laid the groundwork by enshrining political equality and voting rights for women in Articles 325 and 326¹⁴.

10.2 Post-Independence: Reforms and the Rise of Reservations

In the aftermath of India's independence, there was a concerted drive to fortify local governance structures. A seminal development in this pursuit was the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee of 1957, which proposed the establishment of a three-tier Panchayat Raj system. This visionary recommendation laid the foundation for decentralized governance, aiming to empower local

communities and enhance their participation in decision-making processes¹⁵.

However, as these reforms unfolded, concerns surfaced regarding the underrepresentation of women in local governance bodies. Responding to this, the National Perspective Plan for Women in 1988 emerged as a significant advocacy initiative. This plan, crafted by the Government of India, proposed the implementation of a 30% reservation for women in local bodies to address the gender gap and foster greater female participation in grassroots governance¹⁶.

The culmination of these efforts materialized with the enactment of the 64th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1989. This landmark legislation formalized the reservation of 30% of seats for women in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), embedding gender inclusivity into the constitutional framework¹⁷.

This legislative stride aimed not only at rectifying historical gender imbalances but also at fostering a more equitable and representative local governance landscape. The 64th Constitutional Amendment Act serves as a testament to India's commitment to advancing gender equality and recognizing the pivotal role women play in shaping local governance. By reserving seats for women, the legislation sought to create an environment that encourages diverse perspectives and ensures a more inclusive decision-making process within Urban Local Bodies. This legislative journey underscores the ongoing evolution of India's governance framework to align with principles of gender equity and participatory democracy.

11. Overcoming Challenges and Making Strides

Despite these legislative advancements, the early years of reservation saw limited participation due to factors like social norms, lack of awareness, and inadequate support structures. Studies like those by Phadke¹⁸ and Deshpande¹⁹ highlight the initial challenges nominated women face in Maharashtra, showcasing the need for capacity-building and empowerment initiatives.

However, the story has its successes. States like Karnataka implemented reservations earlier, paving the way for increased women's representation. Gradually, the number of elected women began to rise, with states like Andhra Pradesh and Odisha even exceeding the 30% reservation, demonstrating a commitment to gender parity²⁰.

11.1 A Journey Still Evolving

Women's engagement in Indian ULBs continues to evolve, shaped by historical legacies, ongoing reforms, and the collective efforts of women, policymakers, and civil society. While significant progress has been made, challenges like inadequate resources, discriminatory attitudes, and gender-based violence persist. As we look towards the future, continued efforts to address these issues, strengthen support structures, and promote women's leadership are crucial to ensure their meaningful and impactful participation in shaping the urban landscape.

11.2 The 74th Constitutional Amendment and its Impact on Women's Political Participation in ULBs

The 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) of 1992 is pivotal in the historical narrative of women's political engagement in Indian Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). Recognizing the limitations of existing structures, it aimed to breathe new life into local governance and address the underrepresentation of women. This section delves into the critical aspects of the amendment, its impact, and the ongoing challenges women face in ULBs.

12. A Constitutional Mandate for Gender Parity

The inclusion of Article 243T in the Constitution through the amendment guaranteed that "at least one-third of the seats" in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) would be reserved for women through direct elections. This provision marked a significant departure from previous practices and aimed to bolster women's participation across various roles within ULBs, including as voters, members of political parties, candidates, and ultimately, as elected representatives. Importantly, the focus extended beyond mere reservation to empowering women through their active involvement in decision-making, planning, and implementation processes within local governance structures²¹. This groundbreaking provision was a pivotal step toward promoting gender equality and ensuring the meaningful inclusion of women in the democratic processes at the grassroots level.

12.1 Beyond Numbers: Exploring the "Critical Mass" and its Challenges

While the 74th CAA undoubtedly increased women's presence in ULBs, questions around active participation and independent decision-making remain. Scholars like John²² explore the "critical mass" argument, positing that increased representation can lead to more women taking the initiative and shaping policy. However, concerns regarding mere presence versus meaningful engagement persist.

12.2 Navigating the Patriarchal Landscape: Obstacles to Inclusivity

Several factors continue to hinder women's full participation in ULBs. Patriarchal mindsets within families, societies, and even amongst voters create a resistant environment²³.

The compatibility of political life with care work presents another challenge, especially considering the demanding nature of urban politics²⁴. Additionally, political parties often favor women from affluent families, perpetuating proxy politics and undermining true empowerment²⁵.

13. Beyond Entry: Addressing Post-election Challenges

Even after assuming office, women face further hurdles. Limited awareness about democratic systems, lack of training, and inadequate financial resources hampers their ability to function effectively and overcome the "proxy" label²⁶. Nevertheless, studies suggest that a small but significant minority of women leaders, driven by passion or feminist ideology, can navigate these challenges and make a mark on local governance²⁷.

13.1 Moving Forward: Towards an Empowered Future

The 74th CAA has undeniably changed the landscape of women's political engagement in Indian ULBs. However, the journey towards genuine empowerment requires a multi-pronged approach. This includes capacity-building programs, addressing patriarchal

attitudes, encouraging financial independence, and promoting leadership opportunities within political parties. By tackling these challenges, we can pave the way for a future where women play a proactive and transformative role in shaping India's urban spaces.

14. Conclusion

14.1 Women's Political Engagement in Indian ULBs: A Journey towards Inclusive Governance

The growing urbanization in developing countries like India presents a unique opportunity to promote inclusive and sustainable development. At the heart of this endeavour lies the increased engagement of women in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). This section delves into the historical trajectory of women's political participation in Indian ULBs, highlighting its evolution, challenges, and the path toward a more vibrant future.

14.2 From Ancient Roots to Modern Realities: A Historical Perspective

While often overlooked, the story of women's engagement in Indian ULBs stretches back to ancient times. Though largely indirect actors, influential women like Goutami and Rani Rudrama influenced decision-making through their families, even assuming administrative roles reminiscent of modern municipal governance²⁸.

The advent of British rule brought formalization, but reservations for women were met with resistance, reflecting the prevailing patriarchal norms²⁹. Since Independence, India has been committed to ensuring equal rights for women, a dedication enshrined in the Constitution. However, this transition towards gender equality has faced numerous challenges in a society deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms. Despite constitutional guarantees, women encountered barriers while navigating a system historically dominated by men. A pivotal moment in advancing women's representation in governance occurred with the enactment of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992. This landmark legislation, alongside similar initiatives in Panchayati Raj institutions, mandated a 33% reservation for women in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). This bold step aimed to address the gender disparity in political representation

and empower women to actively participate in decision-making processes at the local level. The implementation of this reservation policy resulted in a significant increase in the presence of women in ULBs, indicating a positive shift towards more inclusive governance structures³⁰. The 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, along with its counterparts in Panchayati Raj institutions, not only showcased the government's commitment to gender equality but also served as a catalyst for societal change. By providing women with a formal platform to engage in local governance, these initiatives contributed to dismantling traditional barriers and challenging entrenched gender norms. They facilitated women in asserting their voices, advocating for their communities, and making meaningful contributions to the development agenda at the grassroots level. While Independence marked the beginning of equal rights for women in India, the journey towards gender equality has been gradual and multifaceted. The enactment of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992 and similar initiatives in Panchayati Raj institutions represented pivotal milestones in this journey. They facilitated greater representation and participation of women in local governance, indicating a broader societal shift towards inclusivity and gender parity.

Despite the achievement of numerical representation post-enactment of the 74th CAA, genuine empowerment is still a long way to go. Even though the "critical mass" argument envisions the increase in the numbers can lead to active participation, but bottlenecks like proxy candidatures and lack of training hinder this transition³¹. Constraints like patriarchal norms amongst family members and society, and responsibilities of the care work discourage women from evolving as political executives continue to hinder the complete engagement of women in political spheres³². In addition, the political parties prefer women from politically affluent backgrounds perpetuates the proxy phenomenon, where women may act as proxies for male family members, which undermines the effective participation of women in the political arena³³. These challenges highlight the need for concerted efforts to address deeply rooted social norms and structural barriers that impede women's full and meaningful participation in urban politics.

Even after continuous efforts, elected women still face further challenges including limited awareness about democratic processes, inadequate training, and financial constraints that hinder their ability to function

effectively³⁴. However, studies throw light on the emergence of a trailblazing minority – women driven by education, passion, or feminist ideals who grow above the challenges and make a difference in their own lives and other's lives³⁵.

14.3 Towards a Vibrant Future: A Call to Action

The journey towards inclusive and gender-sensitive urban governance requires a multi-pronged approach. Policymakers must address the root causes of women's underrepresentation by:

- Investing in capacity-building programs to equip women with the necessary skills and knowledge.
- Challenging patriarchal attitudes through education and awareness campaigns.
- Promoting financial independence for women through targeted schemes and microcredit initiatives.
- Encouraging political parties to adopt inclusive practices and support women candidates.

By dismantling these barriers and fostering a supportive environment, we can empower women to become active participants and transformative leaders in shaping the future of Indian cities.

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