

Gujarat and Women in Politics: Contemporary Scenario in Representation – Nandvir N. Chad

Abstract:

Political Empowerment of Women and Women in the Politics are key indicators of gender equality and democratic maturity. Socio-Economic performance has propelled Gujarat to the forefront of India's developed states. Despite Gujarat presents a complex picture in terms of women's political empowerment. While Constitutional directives, local governance structures (PRI) and state policies have significantly expanded opportunities for women through reservations, representation in state politics remains limited. This paper critically examines the historical trajectory, current trends, and institutional challenges shaping women's political participation in Gujarat, drawing exclusively on secondary data from government reports, policies, and election data. The analysis reveals that despite significant structural provisions and social development, women continue to face barriers rooted in patriarchal norms, institutional biases, and socio-economic and political disparities. The study concludes that achieving gender-balanced politics in Gujarat requires a combination of substantial implementation of policy, institutional accountability, and leadership cultivation, aligning with Target 5.5 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: Gujarat, Women in Politics, Political Representation, Gender Equality, Leadership.

Introduction:

The Constitution of India with Fundamental Rights assure its citizens various rights, which includes the right to be elected, freedom of speech, form associations and vote. Directive Principle of state policy guide towards the gender equality and eliminating discrimination based on sex and class and reserving elected positions for women. Women were significantly involved in the Indian Independence movement in the early 20th Century and advocated for independence from Britain. Independence brought gender equality in the form of constitutional rights, but historically women's political participation has remained minimal.

The inclusion of women in State Institution is requisite for representative democracy and inclusive governance. Globally, Target 5.5 of the Sustainable Development Goals emphasizes ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making. In India, constitutional amendments and policies have created route for women's representation, yet the translation of these provisions into political power remains uneven across states. Gujarat, a state that has historically been at the forefront of social reform and economic progress, continues to exhibit a paradoxical pattern. This paper explores the evolution of women's political participation in Gujarat by studying historical foundations,

institutional mechanisms, and statistical trends derived from secondary data sources. This paper aims to understand the existing barriers and suggest ways to strengthen gender inclusion in political arrangement.

Historical Background

In Early Vedic Period (c.1500-1000 BCE) Equality and Authority for women could be traced with the remarkable mentions in manuscripts. In Rigvedic era, women enjoyed prestigious status and freedom. They participate in sabha (assemblies) and samitis (councils) the early forms of decision-making institutions. Several hymns give reference of women who held intellectual and spiritual leadership, such as Gargi, Maitreyi, Apala, Lopamudra and Ghosna. In medieval Gujarat Rani Naiki Devi of the Solanki (Chaulukya) dynasty and Rani Udaymati wife of King Bhimdev I of Solanki dynasty became symbol of courage and political intellect. Women's participation in Gujarat's public life can be traced back to the early twentieth century, when reformist and nationalist movements provided a platform for women's activism. Figures such as **Anasuya Sarabhai**, the pioneer of India's labor movement, and **Kasturba Gandhi**, who led grassroots mobilization during the freedom struggle, symbolize Gujarat's legacy of women's leadership. Women actively engaged in campaigns for education, prohibition, and welfare reforms, supported by reformers like Mridula Sarabhai and Hansa Mehta.

After Independence, the presence of women in political structures remained circumscribed. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992) marked a landmark by mandating reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutes and urban local bodies. Gujarat, being among the first states to implement 50% reservation for women in panchayati raj institutions, witnessed striking rise in women's participation at the local level. However, this expansion of representation has not rendered proportionally to the state legislature or parliamentary seats. After 67 Years of the Independence Gujarat had Anandiben Patel as first Women Chief Minister in 2014.

Current Status of Women in Gujarat Politics

a. Local Governance:

Gujarat Panchayats (Amendment) Act, 2011 had increased women's reservation from 33% to 50% in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). According to the **Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2023)**, women constitute nearly half of elected representatives in Gram Panchayats, Taluka Panchayats, and District Panchayats across the state. This Act has helped women attain administrative exposure and political identity.

b. State Legislative Assembly:

Women's representation in the Gujarat Legislative Assembly remains consistently low. Data from the **Election Commission of India (ECI, 2022)** indicates that out of 182 assembly seats, only 14 are currently held by women, amounting to less than 8% representation. Historically, this figure has rarely crossed 10%. The political arena continues to be dominated by men, reflecting the structural imbalance in candidate selection and leadership promotion within major parties.

Year	Total Seats	Women Elected
2012	182	13
2017	182	10
2022	182	15

Performance of Contesting Candidates - 2022		Male	Female	Total
I.	No. of Contestants	1483	138	1621
II.	Elected	167	15	182

*Source: Election Commission of India.

c. Lok Sabha Representation:

At the lower house of the parliament, Gujarat has sent comparatively fewer women to Lok Sabha. As of the 18th Lok Sabha (2024), only 4 out of 26 Members of Parliament from Gujarat were women, roughly 15%. This figure has remained stagnant for over a decade, showing limited political mobility for women beyond the state level.

Year	Total Seats	Women Elected
2024	26	4
2019	26	6
2014	26	4

Performance of Contesting Candidates-2024		Male	Female	Total
I.	No. of Contestants	247	19	266
II.	Elected	22	4	26

*Source: Election Commission of India.

d. Leadership Roles:

Gujarat made a landmark achievement in 2014. Anandiben Patel became the state's first woman Chief Minister. Her tenure represented a breakthrough in leadership visibility but also highlighted the women occupying executive political positions in the state's history after independence. Dr. Nimaben Acharya is the only women leader who held the position of the speaker of Gujarat legislative assembly.

Institutional and Political Mechanisms

The political scenario in Gujarat provides a mix of enabling policies and structural barriers. The **Nari Gaurav Niti 2024**, introduced by the Government of Gujarat, aims to strengthen women's participation in public life and decision-making. Political parties have established women's wings to mobilize female voters and potential leaders. However, the share of women receiving party tickets remains minimal in recent elections. Gujarat Panchayat Act 1993 provides 50% reservation for women candidates in Panchayati Raj Institutes but the substantial implementation couldn't be observed due to SarpanchPati system majorly followed in Panchayats. Where all the decisions were taken by the husbands of the elected women sarpanch. 106th Constitutional Amendment Act (2023) which is also known as Nari Shakti Vandana Adhiniyam reserves one-third of all seats in the lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies across the nation. This reservation will come into effect only after a delimitation exercise is completed, which can happen after the next census.

Institutional efforts such as leadership training workshops and local governance fellowships have been initiated by organizations like the **State Commission for Women** and **SEWA Academy**. Yet, these initiatives often focus on administrative capacity rather than political empowerment. Also Non-Government Organizations Anandi (Area Networking and Development Initiatives), SETU Abhiyan and SWATI (Society for women's action and training initiatives) are working on the Leadership and Political empowerment of Women.

Barriers to Women's Political Participation

Despite policy support, many interlinked barriers restrict women's vigorous engagement in politics in Gujarat:

1. **Socio-cultural Barriers:** Traditional gender roles, societal expectations, and family responsibilities demoralize women from participating in politics.
2. **Economic Barriers:** Financial dependency and the high cost of election campaigns act as obstacle for many potential candidates.
3. **Institutional Barriers:** Political parties are often unwilling to nominate women in winnable constituencies, treating them as emblematic candidates.
4. **Cultural Perceptions:** Politics is still recognized as a male domain, creating psychological barriers for women leaders to assert influence.
5. **Lack of Mentorship:** Non availability of usual female political mentors results in fewer role models and networks for emerging women politicians.

Achievements and Emerging Trends

Despite these challenges, Gujarat is witnessing progress in women's leadership. Thousands of women have served as sarpanches and municipal leaders, often driving improvements in sanitation, education, and welfare services. Empirical evidence from secondary evaluations by **UNDP India (2025)** and **NITI Aayog (2024-25)** suggests that women-led local governments in Gujarat exhibit higher responsiveness to community needs.

Women & Child development department of Gujarat had initiated a concept of Balika Panchayat, which provides a platform to adolescent girls and functions as the model panchayats in every villages. Formation of Balika Panchayat is based on the edges of the real Gram Panchayat, where the election process occurs and members of the Balika panchayat are elected democratically. Ideally 14 to 21 years of age girls are the members and electoral of the Balika Panchayat. Each ward having its representatives. Balika Panchayat is an innovative and unique platform where local decisions are made by participants to promote gender equality and empowerment of women. It serves as a forum for girls to address and resolve issues concerning them. The primary goal of Balika Panchayat is to bring about a transformative change in society's perception of girls in rural communities. By involving young girls in this initiative, it demonstrates that girls can also play a significant role in governance and contribute effectively to resolve social issues.

Conclusion:

Gujarat's political scenario reflects both achievement and dichotomy. The reservation system in local governance has doubtlessly created a generation of politically aware women, yet the upper tiers of political power remain male-dominated. Historical progress, progressive culture, and economic growth have not fully resolved the gap in political representation.

For Gujarat to strengthen its democratic values, women must move from emblematic representation to substantive leadership. The state's future political path depends on institutional reforms, political will, and the redefinition of gender roles within governance. A truly inclusive democracy in Gujarat will be realized only when women's leadership becomes both obvious and impactful across all stages of power.

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