



# Status of Women in Indian Society: A Critical Review in the Contemporary Political Discourse of the 21st Century

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## Abstract:

The status of women in India is a multifaceted narrative of constitutional idealism versus grounded patriarchal realities. This paper critically evaluates the trajectory of women's empowerment from its historical roots to the contemporary political landscape of 2026. Utilizing data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5 and preliminary NFHS-6), Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS 2024-25), and 18th Lok Sabha election outcomes, the study argues that while "descriptive representation" has seen symbolic victories, such as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023, "substantive empowerment" remains hindered by structural barriers. The paper adopts an intersectional lens to analyze how caste, class, and the "digital divide" redefine gender roles in the 21st century.

Findings suggest a "participation paradox" where increased female voter turnout has not translated into proportional legislative presence or economic parity. Policy recommendations focus on moving beyond beneficiary-oriented welfare toward agency-led structural transformation.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Political Discourse, Feminism, Patriarchy, Intersectionality, 18th Lok Sabha, Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam.



## 1. Introduction

The status of women serves as the definitive litmus test for any democracy's maturity. In the Indian context, the 21st century was envisioned as an era of "Women-led Development." However, as of 2026, the discourse remains caught between high-velocity policy rhetoric and slow-moving socio-cultural shifts. While India has achieved significant milestones, including the presidency of Droupadi Murmu, representing both gender and indigenous intersectionality, the broader masses of Indian women navigate a landscape of systemic inequality. Contemporary political discourse has shifted from treating women as "welfare recipients" to recognizing them as a "decisive electoral bloc." Yet, this visibility is often instrumental, focusing on women as voters rather than as leaders. This paper explores this tension, tracing the historical evolution of women's status and analyzing the specific barriers that prevent the transition from formal equality to substantive justice.

## 2. Historical Evolution: From Dignity to Subjugation

### 2.1 The Ancient Period: The Vedic Zenith

In the early Vedic period (c. 1500–1000 BCE), women held a relatively egalitarian status. The concept of Ardhgini (the equal half) was not merely spiritual but social. Women like Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi participated in the highest intellectual assemblies.

Education was accessible, and the practice of Upanyana (initiation) was not restricted by gender. However, the later Vedic period witnessed the codification of patriarchal norms through the Dharmashastras, which gradually curtailed women's property rights and social mobility.

### 2.2 The Medieval Period: The Dark Age of Autonomy

The medieval era brought institutionalized restrictions. Feudalism and foreign invasions led to the inward withdrawal of society, resulting in practices like Purdah, Sati, and child marriage. Women were largely relegated to the private sphere. Despite this, the Bhakti and Sufi movements offered a "spiritual subversion," where figures like Mirabai and Akkamahadevi challenged patriarchal family structures through religious agency.

### 2.3 The Modern Period: Reform and Resistance

The 19th-century Renaissance, led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Jyotirao Phule, placed women's "protection" at the center of the nationalist agenda. Post-1947, the Indian Constitution emerged as a radical document of gender justice. Articles 14, 15, and 16 provided the de jure basis for equality, but the de facto struggle against "internalized patriarchy" continued well into the 21st century.

## 3. The Contemporary Political Landscape (2024–2026)

### 3.1 The 18th Lok Sabha and the Representation Gap

The 2024 General Elections presented a contradiction. While women's voter turnout reached historic parity with men, the number of women elected to the 18th Lok Sabha actually saw a slight dip.

Statistics: Only 74 women (approx. 13.6%) were elected to the 543-member lower house, down from 78 in 2019.

The Barrier: Major political parties gave less than 10-12% of tickets to female candidates, citing "winnability"—a coded term for the lack of muscle and money power typically associated with male-dominated political networks.



### 3.2 Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (Women's Reservation Act, 2023)

The passage of the 106th Constitutional Amendment was a landmark event. It mandates 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.

However, as of 2026, the implementation remains tied to the upcoming Census and Delimitation exercise. This "deferred empowerment" serves as a primary critique in contemporary discourse; the legislative intent is clear, but the political will to implement it immediately remains absent.

### 4. Socio-Economic Status: The Participation Paradox

The statistical landscape of gender in India between 2024 and 2026 reveals a persistent gap between educational attainment, financial access, and actual economic participation. Below is the conversion of the comparative indicators into a narrative analysis:

#### 1. The Literacy Gap

According to the PLFS 2024-25 data, there remains a notable disparity in basic educational foundations; while the male literacy rate has reached 84.4%, the female literacy rate lags behind at 71.8%. This 12.6% margin suggests that while female education is rising, universal literacy remains an unfinished agenda.

#### 2. Rural Labour Force Participation (LFPR)

In the rural economy, data from October–December 2025 shows that men participate in the labor force at nearly double the rate of women. Specifically, 76.0% of rural men are economically active, compared to 40.1% of rural women. While 40.1% represents a significant portion of the workforce, much of this is often concentrated in informal agricultural labor.

#### 3. Urban Labour Force Participation (LFPR)

The disparity is even more pronounced in urban centers, where structural barriers like the "double burden" of housework and lack of childcare are most acute. The urban male LFPR stands high at 73.8%, whereas urban female participation is significantly lower at just 25.3%. This indicates that only one in four urban women is currently part of the formal or informal labor market.

#### 4. Financial Inclusion and Parity

The most promising area of convergence is found in banking and financial access. Under the PMJDY 2026 estimates, the gap in bank account ownership has nearly closed. 79% of women now hold bank accounts, trailing men (82%) by only 3 percentage points. This suggests that while women may not yet have equal participation in the workforce, they are rapidly achieving near-parity in financial connectivity.

Analysis: The rise in rural female LFPR (40.1%) is often driven by "distress employment" in agriculture rather than high-value formal sector jobs. In urban areas, the "leaky pipeline" remains a reality, where women drop out of the workforce due to the "Double Burden", the expectation to manage both professional roles and 90% of unpaid domestic care work.

#### 5. Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Power

To review women's status critically, one must look at the Intersectionality Matrix. A Dalit woman in rural Odisha faces a qualitatively different set of barriers than a Brahmin woman in urban Bengaluru.

Caste and Gender:

Political representation is often monopolized by upper-caste women. The demand for a "Quota within Quota" for OBC and minority women highlights the internal fractures within the Indian feminist movement.



The Digital Divide: In the 21st century, empowerment is tied to digital literacy. As per 2025 data, only 35% of Indian women have regular access to the internet compared to 60% of men. This "Digital Patriarchy" limits access to tele-health, e-governance, and the gig economy.

## 6. Rationale of the Study

Despite India having one of the most progressive Constitutions in the world, the gap between de jure (legal) and de facto (actual) equality remains wide. The rationale for this study stems from the need to analyze why, despite record-high female voter turnout in 2024 and 2025, women's representation in the Parliament remains below 15%. Furthermore, existing literature often treats "Indian Women" as a monolith. This study is necessitated by the urgency to apply an intersectional lens, viewing gender through the prisms of caste, religion, and the burgeoning digital divide to understand the modern political subjecthood of women.

## 7. Literature Review

The academic inquiry into Indian womanhood is vast. Sharma et al. (2023) argue that while financial inclusion (via Jan Dhan accounts) has reached 79%, it has not necessarily been translated into financial agency, as many accounts are managed by male relatives. Kumari & Siotra (2023) highlight the "Urban-Rural Divide," noting that while urban women have higher education, rural women often exhibit higher (though low-quality) labor force participation due to agricultural necessity.

Muniyappa (2022) critiques the "Proxy Representation" in Panchayats, where the Sarpanch-Pati (husband of the head) wields the actual power. Recent studies by Rani & Kamalakar (2025) have brought "Intersectionality" to the forefront, arguing that Dalit and Tribal women face a "double marginalization" that mainstream feminist discourse often overlooks. Walia (2025) further notes that the "Care Economy" remains the biggest invisible barrier, as Indian women perform nearly 6 hours of unpaid work daily compared to less than an hour by men.

## 8. Objectives of the Study

To analyze the historical evolution of women's status in Indian society from the Vedic period to the post-independence era.

To examine the role of 21st-century political discourse (specifically the 18th Lok Sabha and the 2023 Reservation Act) in shaping women's agency.

To assess women's participation in socio-economic spheres using NFHS-5 and PLFS (2024-25) data.

To identify systemic barriers (Patriarchy, Digital Divide, GBV) that hinders empowerment.

To suggest a policy roadmap for achieving substantive gender justice.

## 9. Discussion of Objectives

### 9.1 Historical Evolution: A Pendulum of Power

The Vedic Era: Women enjoyed Upanayana that was initiation into education and chose partners via Swayamvara.

The Medieval Decline: The influx of feudal hierarchies and the codification of the Manusmriti led to the "Domesticated Woman." Rights to property and public speech were systematically revoked.

The Reformatory Modernity: The 19th-century social reforms (Sati abolition, Widow remarriage) were led by men. It was only during the Freedom Struggle, under Gandhi's call, that women entered the public sphere en masse, reclaiming their agency.



## 9.2 Political Discourse: The "Voter vs. Leader" Dilemma

In the 2024 General Elections, women's participation was at an all-time high. However, political parties treat women as a "vote bank" through "Labharthis" (beneficiary) schemes (e.g., free gas, cash transfers).

**Critical Analysis:** While these schemes provide immediate relief, they reinforce the image of women as "dependents" rather than "decision-makers." The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhinyam (2023) is a step forward, but its delayed implementation (contingent on census and delimitation) remains a point of critical contention in 2026.

## 9.3 Socio-Economic Participation

The Participation Paradox is evident here.

**Education:** Female enrollment in Higher Education has risen by 32% in the last decade (AISHE data).

**Economy:** Paradoxically, the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) remains stagnant around 25-30% in urban areas. This suggests that education is not seamlessly translating into employment, often due to the "marriage penalty" and lack of safe public infrastructure.

## 10. Research Gaps

**Lack of Longitudinal Studies:** How digital access specifically changes the "political" agency of rural women.

**Climate Change & Gender:** Minimal research on how climate-induced migration in Eastern India affects women's safety and health.

**The "Gig" Economy:** Insufficient data on women's role in the platform economy (delivery, beauty services, etc.).

## 11. Challenges and Barriers to Substantive Equality

### 11.1 The "Sarpanch-Pati" Phenomenon

In Panchayati Raj Institutions (where 33-50% reservation exists), the actual power is often exercised by the husbands or male relatives of elected women. This "proxy representation" undermines the spirit of the 73rd and 74th Amendments.

### 11.2 Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Despite stringent laws like the Nirbhaya Act and the POSH Act (2013), the NCRB reports continue to show a rise in crimes against women. The 21st century has also seen the rise of Cyber-Violence, including deepfakes, doxxing, and online harassment, which effectively silences women in the digital public square.

## 12. Findings and Discussion

The critical review yields five primary findings:

**Symbolic vs. Substantive:** Political parties use "Woman as Voter" (through cash transfers and subsidies) to win elections, but resist "Woman as Leader" (by denying tickets).

**The Middle-Income Trap:** Educated urban women are withdrawing from the workforce or stagnating in middle management due to lack of institutional childcare and eldercare.

**The Rural Paradox:** Rural women are more "active" in the labor force but remain invisible as "contributing family workers" without land titles.



**Institutional Resistance:** Legal reforms (like the 2023 Reservation Act) are frequently delayed by procedural technicalities (Delimitation).

**Intersectional Neglect:** Policy frameworks often treat "Women" as a monolithic category, ignoring the specific vulnerabilities of tribal, trans, and disabled women.

### 13. Policy Recommendations

To transition from welfare to agency, the following interventions are necessary:

**Immediate Delinkage:** Separate the implementation of the Women's Reservation Bill from the Delimitation exercise to ensure 33% representation by the 2029 elections.

**Gender Budgeting 2.0:** Move beyond mere allocation to Gender Impact Assessment of all infrastructure projects (e.g., how street lighting or public transport specifically impacts female workforce participation).

**Mandatory ICC Audits:** Strict enforcement of Internal Complaints Committees in both the formal and informal sectors (including the gig economy).

**Digital Literacy Missions:** Targeted schemes to provide smartphones and data literacy to adolescent girls to bridge the 21st-century digital gender gap.

### Conclusion

The status of women in 21st-century India is a story of resilient agency in a resistant structure. While the "New Indian Woman" is visible in space missions, corporate boardrooms, and at the ballot box, the shadows of the "Manusmriti mindset" persist in private households and political party offices. The 21st-century political discourse has successfully made gender a central theme, but it has yet to make gender equality a central reality. True empowerment will only occur when women move from being the "subjects of policy" to the "architects of power."

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