

## A Historical Perspective on the Role of Women in India's Political Development from Ancient Times to the Postmodern Era

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### **Abstract:**

The evolution of women's position from the Rig-Vedic Period to the present is the subject of this essay. In both the household and society, ancient Vedic Aryan women were treated with respect and had an equal status. Women's standing in society declined.

Women's position was somewhat supported by Buddhism and Jainism, but during British administration, their social standing was far from ideal. Hindu women suffered from child marriage, female infanticide, Purdah, Sati, and other abuses. This state was prevalent almost everywhere in the nation. Indian intellectuals were aware of the shameful social status of women as a renaissance emerged in the nineteenth century. The cause of women was pursued by religious and social groups such as the Ram Krishna Mission, the Aryan Samaj, and the Brahmo Samaj. Women's standing in relation to national politics increased as a result of various advancements in women's education over the 20th century.

**Keywords:** Human society, women, socioeconomics, politics, Rig Vedic, Mourya, British, Renaissance, Medieval India, Women's Liberation Fighters, Arya Samaj, Brahma Samaj, Postmodern, and Elections.

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Women play a vital role in society. They are very important in deciding a country's future. As a result, acknowledging their engagement and contribution to the socioeconomic and political concerns of society becomes crucial. History, however, shows that women have not received the respect they deserve in society. In India, women are often disregarded and subjected to social harassment. Several societal taboos have affected them and continue to do so, especially in emerging nations like India. Even though they are treated equally, this equality exists more in the legal system than in practice. Ironically, crime against women should have reached frightening proportions in a century like India, where the feminine form is the focus of the deepest devotion. Human civilization has been divided and subdivided according to sex, color, caste, class, creed, and religion throughout its early to modern history. The social implications of color, caste, class, creed, and religion include the fact that sex, caste, class, and religion have all been used to determine an individual's role, position, participation, power, and authority in the socioeconomic and political spheres to a greater degree. The position of women has also been influenced by the aforementioned factors. Women have always been seen as inferior to

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**A Historical Perspective on the Role of Women in India's Political Development From Ancient Times to the Postmodern Era**

*Dr. Nagendra Kumar*

males, despite the reality that their standing differs from society to society according to sociocultural influences. Their social activity, interactions, and involvement in decision-making both within and outside the family have been comparatively restricted to the male realm.

The term 'woman' suggests a lengthy history of reliance and subservience. Women, who make up half of mankind, have endured centuries of repression, oppression, and subordination in a variety of spheres of endeavor, including politics. In India, the socioeconomic and political discourse has lately shifted to focus on women's standing.

#### **Women's political position in the ancient period:**

Rig-Vedic Aryan women were co-partners in life, sharing its joys and tragedies, its pleasures and dangers, rather than being decorative accessories.

Both the family and society held them in a position of equality and respect. They had the same schooling as males and had a great deal of autonomy over their affairs. They were respected and cared for by the society at large, and they were important in social, political, and family life. There is proof that women often engage in political activity.

Together with males, they took part in the discussions of the Sabha and Vidatha, the first Indo-Aryan folk assembly.

Typically, the daughter did not have legal standing during the Vedic Period. She was not authorized to own, purchase, or sell the property.

The Rigveda made it very clear that "a son born of the body does not transfer wealth to sister," therefore she was unable to claim any part with her brothers. Only when a married daughter had no brothers might she inherit from her father while living with her husband. Throughout the Vedic era, the wife's main limitation was a proprietary one. Additionally, the wife had no legal standing. She was unable to inherit or own property. The widow's legal position also included excessive proprietary rights. Nonetheless, throughout the Post Vedic Period, there was a little improvement in the legal standing of widows, daughters, and spouses.

Because having a daughter was considered undesirable in the later Vedic Period, women's status somewhat declined. The idea of ceremonial purity was forced onto marriage. Women were often excluded from the most hygienic and spiritual events because they were seen as unclean. Since he was required to conduct his parents' burial rites, without which the deceased were thought to go to hell, a son was highly desirable. The daughter was the cause of the family's problems, while the boy was seen as their best chance. These countries decreased the status of females while elevating the status of men. However, these Brahminical narratives were not as common. A well-behaved and gifted daughter was considered the pride of the family in refined circles.

Because of some internal cultural developments, women's positions continued to be steadily devalued. Their degeneration was mostly caused by forced marriage, the dasi-system, the

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#### **A Historical Perspective on the Role of Women in India's Political Development From Ancient Times to the Postmodern Era**

*Dr. Nagendra Kumar*

specialization of Vedic education, and the limitation of women's access to intellectual and religious instruction. They were restricted to the house and early marriage by the institution of marriage and the family.

Their ignorance was increased by a lack of education and some Brahminical ideas, which also made women reliant on males for political matters.

By offering a different position of dignity to those who desired to separate themselves from the traditional role of women in the family and society and join the Sangha, Buddhism and Jainism partially supported the status of women. Women were accorded a lower status than males in the monastic administration when Buddhism allowed them to become nuns and participate in a higher spiritual life. At first, Badha even opposed women being admitted to the Sangha. But after being convinced by his student Ananda, he consented to the establishment of the nuns' order. But he gave the nuns a special set of guidelines called "Bikkhuni Patimokkha." It includes a few additional limitations that mostly pertain to the nuns' living and mobility as well as the monks' overall control over them. Jainism upheld the idea that a nun was subordinate to a monk in the monastic life, much as other major faiths. Women were seen as less capable of direct salvation since Jainism typically held that the celibate life was superior.

Throughout the Mauryan and Gupta periods, women's lowly position persisted. Nonetheless, there were female spies in the Mauryan Empire, and women made up the group that ensured the King's personal safety and protection. This indicates that throughout this time, people had trust in the ability and loyalty of women. Women were allowed to exercise their public rights throughout the Gupta era. Examples include Princess Vajayabhatarika, who served as the provincial governor under Vikramaditya I of the Chalukya dynasty of Vatapi in the seventh century A.D., and Queen Prabhavati Gupta, daughter of Emperor Chandragupta II, who reigned in the fourth century A.D.

#### **The role of women in politics throughout the Middle Ages:**

The position of women declined much further throughout the Middle Ages. Hindu daughters were married when they were nine or 10 years old, and in some instances, girls were married before they could speak. Girls who married at a younger age were denied access to any kind of schooling. The daughter's position increasingly deteriorated as a result of these conditions. The wife's legal situation may have been improved, particularly with regard to inheritance. Their reliance on males resulted from their widespread exclusion from property succession. Because to the lower marriage age, the prohibition on remarriage, the Sati system, and the Purdah system, widows' legal status was at its worst during the Muslim era.

Muslim women from royal families did, however, actively engage in social and political life in spite of their rigorous isolation.

Some Mughal women were distinguished authors and capable administrators. Gulbadan Begum was one of the well-known figures. Shaibji, Chand Bidi, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Nur Jahan, Jahan Ara, and

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### **A Historical Perspective on the Role of Women in India's Political Development From Ancient Times to the Postmodern Era**

*Dr. Nagendra Kumar*

Razia Sultana, among others.

It's noteworthy to notice that women's high regard and position led to effective administration at a period when their overall social position and status had declined in society. Throughout the history of medieval India, we come across stories of various notable Rajputs. Didda, the queen of Kashmir, was a dynamic and capable leader who ruled Kashmir from 958 to 1003 A.D. Following her husband's death in the second battle of Grain in 1192 A.D., Kurma Devi, the queen of the valiant Rajput lord Samarsi (Samar Singh) of Chitor, led the Rajputs and personally engaged Kutub-d-din near Amber in combat. On August 26, 1003, a group of courageous Rajput women led by Padmini jumped into the Jauhar fire to escape "Pollution and captivity." Tarabai, a Rajput lady of exceptional military prowess who lived at the start of the 16th century, was the daughter of Rao Surtan, the chief of Bednore, who was a member of the Solanki tribes.

During the ineffective reign of her son Vikram Jeet, the son and successor of Maharana Sanga, Rani Karnavati of Mewar became deeply involved in the political affairs of that realm and fell victim to the sins of maladministration. Another example of unwavering will and unselfish bravery was Rani Durgavati of Gondwana. She repelled Baz Bahadur's armed assault on the Kingdom of Gondwana and engaged in combat with Mughal troops. She chose death over shame, in keeping with the Rajputs' genuine values, and killed herself when her soldiers abandoned her after the Mughals' victory.

#### **The role of women in politics throughout the modern era:**

Women's status in society was far from ideal under British rule. Hindu women suffered from child marriage, female infanticide, Purdah, Sati, and other atrocities. Nearly the whole nation was affected by this illness, and princely realms were not an exception. Indian women's character and skill in the 19th century were diverted by the extraordinary courage of Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi (1835-58). She battled valiantly against the British army and died a hero's death during the Indian Mutiny of 1857. Her administration and courage were also praised by her opponents.

The nineteenth-century renaissance made Indian intellectuals more aware of the shameful socioeconomic circumstances facing their people, particularly with regard to women. They were aware of the Indian woman's disgraceful status, which was nothing more than a story of pain and humiliation endured from birth to death. The cause of women was pursued by religious and social groups such as the Ram Krishan Mission, the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, and the Prarthana Samaj. The inhumane Sati ritual was fought by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who is often referred to as the founder of the Indian Renaissance. He called on the British government to enact legislation outlawing the inhumane custom of a widow being burned on her husband's burial pyre. "The crime of culpable homicide," which Sati was found guilty of on December 4, 1829, was punishable by a fine, imprisonment, or both. Keshab Chandra Sen's actions against the Civil Marriage Act of 1872, which prohibited early marriage. The child marriage restraint act, which established 14 as the minimum age for a girl to marry, was introduced in 1929 in an effort to curb the perceived negative effects of child marriage and support female education. The Native Marriage Act of 1954, which set the minimum

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### **A Historical Perspective on the Role of Women in India's Political Development From Ancient Times to the Postmodern Era**

*Dr. Nagendra Kumar*

marriage age for females at 18, was later passed thanks to special marriage.

The situation of women in India with the onset of British rule in the 18th century was a dismal one. Women's Vedic rights were a thing of the past; they have since faded and been forgotten. The locals' religious feelings were not aligned with the British government's stance. For over a century, they opposed any social changes, and social reformers didn't really try to give women a respectable place in society until the nineteenth century.

Progress in women's education during the 20th century led to an increase in awareness among educated women, which was reflected in the formation of various women's organizations such as the All India Women's Conference, the National Council for Women, and the Women's Indian Association of Madras, among others. Inspired by Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins established the Women's Indian Association of Madras. When Lord Morley visited India in 1917, a delegation headed by Sarojini Naidu and backed by Mahatma Gandhi met him under the organization's auspices. It called for women to have the same voting rights as males. In fact, it was the first time women had tried to obtain political rights.

Ten lakh women were granted the right to vote in 1919 as a result of the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms. But it wasn't until 1932 that women used their right to vote. Women were first allowed to serve in legislatures in 1926. Muthulakshmi Reddy, a committed social worker from Madras, was the first woman to be nominated for and elected as the deputy chairperson of the Madras Legislative Council.

A new era began with Mahatma Gandhi's groundbreaking appeal for women to join the fight for liberation. He acknowledged the significance of women's participation in the fight for liberation. Gandhi believed that women had more potential than males for social reconstruction and satyagraha. "Women have an advantage over men in the nonviolent struggle because they are more religiously devoted than men in any way," he said. Her sex is characterized by discreet and respectful service. The sacrifice of a woman is embodied. She moves mountains when she acts with the proper attitude.

Nehru led the council's "Fundamental Rights Resolution" at the Indian National Congress session in Karachi in 1931. Sarojini Naidu's introduction of the Devadasi Bill prevented these women's lives from being degraded. The first woman to run for office from the South Kanara constituency was Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya, a trailblazer in the women's movement, in 1926.

The first women elected to the central assembly were Annu Swaminathan, Renuka Roy, and Radha Bai Subbaraya.

Women joined forces with others to continue the 1942 "Quit India Movement" when all of its leading figures were incarcerated, leaving it essentially leaderless. They did this by organizing strikes, processions, meetings, and rallies. Among the well-known members of the Quit India Movement were Aruna Asaf Ali, Kalpana Joshi, Preeti Waddadar, Kanaklata, Bauri, Roopvati Jain, Durga Bai, Sushila Devi, and Usha Mehta. During the Quit India campaign, Kasturba Gandhi passed away in prison.

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### **A Historical Perspective on the Role of Women in India's Political Development From Ancient Times to the Postmodern Era**

*Dr. Nagendra Kumar*

Following Subhash Chandra Bose's urgent appeal, a women's regiment called "The Rani of Jhansi Regiment" was established in Singapore in July 1943, with Laxmi Sehgal serving as its commander.

Women worked with men during the Quit India Movement in 1942. Indian women were able to establish themselves on par with males. Mrs. Sucheta Kriplani organized anti-British resistance and went underground alongside Jai Prakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohia, and Aruna Asap Ali. She was ultimately taken into custody in Patna in 1942 and held in solitary confinement for almost a year. Following her election as president of the All Indian Congress working committee, Kamala Chattopadhyaya was imprisoned in 1942 and sent to Vellore, where she was freed in 1944 after two years.

The All-India Congress's women's branch was established in 1942. According to the special ordinances, Arun Asif Ali, K.C. Nair, and Jugal Kishore Khanna, general secretary of the Delhi Provincial Congress Committee, were deemed "absconders," and their belongings were seized. The Shimla During the fourteen to fifteen brutal Lathi-charges that occurred between August 9 and August 8, Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur played a prominent role in the protest gatherings and processions. Police forces also beat and detained female students who attended protest gatherings. Along with other employees, Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur was taken into custody. The female pupils shown incredible bravery. A first-year Allahabad University student named Shakuntla Sharma was successful in raising the tricolor flag atop the "Kachehri" building. Shakuntla Sharma suffered severe injuries as a result of a lathi charge that was ordered by A.D. Dixon, the collector and superintendent of police. There were a lot more Ahmedabad women leading the fight for independence. Gandhi Jayanti was observed at schools in Indore. The peaceful and quiet gathering was lathi-charged, and Rukhmaniben, who was supposed to lead the prayer, was taken into custody as soon as she arrived. But many males who were involved in the Quit India Movement were jailed following Gandhi's imprisonment, and female Congress workers fled into hiding.

When it came to creating the constitution for a complementary India, women had to catch up. Up to fourteen women served in the Constituent Assembly when it was established in December 1946. These were the following: Sarojini Naidu from Bihar; Begum Jahanara Shah Nawaz from Punjab; Lita Ray and Begum Ikramulla from Bengal; Suchita Kriplani, Vijaya Laxmi Pandit, Pumima Banerjee, Kamala Chaudhary, and Begum Resul from Uttar Pradesh; Ammu Swaminathan, Dakshayani Vellayudhan, and Durgabai Deshmukh from Madras; Hansa Mehta from Bombay; and Malti Chowdhary from Orissa.

The Indian constitution voluntarily accorded the Indian women the franchises they had been seeking. It put women and men on an equal basis. The adult franchise outlined in Article 326 was a great tool for the framers of the constitution to combat sexism.

#### **The political status of women throughout the post-independence era:**

Equal rights for men and women were guaranteed by the constitution's founders. Equality before the

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### **A Historical Perspective on the Role of Women in India's Political Development From Ancient Times to the Postmodern Era**

*Dr. Nagendra Kumar*

law, equality of sexes, and equal chances in all spheres of life are guaranteed by the basic rights expressed in Articles 14, 15, and 16. Discrimination on the basis of religion, ethnicity, caste, sex, and place of birth is forbidden under Article 15. In order to preserve a balance in the position and status of men and women under the basic obligations, clause three of the same article states that "nothing in this article shall prevent from making any special provision for women and children." According to Article 51A(e), "among other things," it is the responsibility of every Indian citizen to abstain from actions that diminish the dignity of women. The legal attitude of women was significantly altered by the four enactments—the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, the Hindu Succession Act of 1956, the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act of 1956, and the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act of 1956.

Article 325 prohibits special elections based on sex, caste, ethnicity, or religion. Article 326 addresses adult suffrage elections for the state's legislative assembly, in accordance with all other political rights granted by the constitution, including the right of universal adult suffrage. In addition, women's participation in political activities has grown and improved as a result of modernization and education, which free India chose, since their horizons have expanded and they have gained knowledge of the outside world. As a result, they have begun actively participating in politics. According to academics studying Indian women's statutes, a number of changes have taken place in the traditional understanding of women's role and status, including new educational and employment opportunities, new socioeconomic patterns, and the right to equal legal and political rights. Women are entering fields that were previously thought to be the exclusive purview of males and are competing with them on an equal basis. Nonetheless, society's perception of women is still shaped by the pressure of long-standing traditions and conventions. Along with religions and prevailing value systems, the patriarchal family structure and the institution of caste are still infused with the spirit of male dominance. A number of researchers have discovered that since 1951, the gap between men and women has been widening in literacy, education, and training, and that women's employment has been rapidly declining.

Women are actively participating in politics and occupying significant positions nowadays. Despite their small numbers, their political and administrative prowess is well acknowledged. Our women's current status is one that their counterparts throughout the globe can only envy. The first woman to hold the prestigious position of president of a United Nations Assembly session was Vijay Laxmi Pandit. For over seventeen years, India was ruled by the iron lady, Indira Gandhi. The history of India has been influenced by female governors, ambassadors, and representatives to foreign organizations, as well as chief ministers, state legislators, and members of the federal and state councils of ministers.

Vijay Laxmi Pandit made a name for herself as an effective Indian ambassador to the USSR, while Sarojini Naidu and Sucheta Kriplani served admirably as the governor and chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. A number of prominent figures, including Sushma Swaraj, Mamta Banerjee, Uma Bharti, Menka Gandhi as the central minister, Sheila Dixit as the chief minister of Delhi, J. Jai Lalita as the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, and Maya Vati as the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, have established

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### **A Historical Perspective on the Role of Women in India's Political Development From Ancient Times to the Postmodern Era**

*Dr. Nagendra Kumar*

their abilities in power politics. The important position of India's top election commissioner was given to V.S. Rama Devi.

51 women ran for 489 Lok Sabha seats in the first general election, which took place in 1952. Twenty-three of the 51 female candidates were chosen to serve in the Lok Sabha. There were 4.70 percent of women in the Lok Sabha. Following that, it rose to 5.46 percent in the 1957 Lok Sabha election, 6.60 percent in the 1962 Lok Sabha election, 5.18 percent in 1967, 3.87 percent in 1971, 3.50 percent in 1977, 5.51 percent in 1980, 7.93 percent in 1984, 5.18 percent in 1989, 7.40 percent in 1991, 7.37 percent in 1996, 7.92 percent in 1998, and 9.02 percent in the 13 Lok Sabha elections that were held in 1999. According to these statistics, women make up a maximum of 9.3% of the Lok Sabha. But between the first general election and the 13th general election of the Lok Sabha, it rose from 4.70 to 9.3 percent. Nonetheless, their representation may be greater than that of males themselves. Furthermore, considering that women make up about half of the population.

According to the research, women's strength in the Lok Sabha is much lower. In the realm of power politics, they are severely disadvantaged.

To guarantee that women play a sufficient part in the central legislative branch and other political institutions, however, a purposeful and consistent policy is required. The federal and state administrations have implemented a few cosmetic measures, mostly to gain the support of women for electoral objectives rather than to enhance their living situations. 33 percent of seats should be reserved for women; this is just one electoral tenet. In order to guarantee women's effective participation and empowerment in democratic institutions, the administration submitted a women's reservation law that calls for a 33% reserve of seats for women in the State Legislature Assemblies and Parliament. The Political Parties, however, fell far short of the pledged 33% female seat reserve in the State Legislative Assemblies and Parliament.

The United Nations' Women's Development Decade (1975–1985) sparked a lot of interest in women's issues in this nation. Numerous women's organizations were founded and began advocating for women's rights. They made the government take a serious look at the issues facing women. Their method differed from previous comparable efforts in terms of politics. They believed that women should stop being passive observers. They need to take an active role in both political and developmental endeavors.

#### **Women's representation in parliament in 2019:**

State legislatures and parliaments "establish laws and hold the government accountable, but also make a representative claim" to represent various communities, identity groups, and interests." Membership in the legislature is a prerequisite for serving as a minister in parliamentary democracies like India. Although the number of women voting in elections has significantly increased, the percentage of female lawmakers in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha has remained low when compared to their male counterparts (see Tables 1 and 2). The largest percentage of women

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### **A Historical Perspective on the Role of Women in India's Political Development From Ancient Times to the Postmodern Era**

*Dr. Nagendra Kumar*



elected to the Lok Sabha to date was less than 15% of the total number of MPs in the 2019 elections.

States and political parties differ significantly in the proportion of female candidates and MPs. The states of West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh have the most percentage of female MPs in the current Lok Sabha (17th). In Uttar Pradesh, women make up 14% of all Lok Sabha members, whereas in Bengal, that number is 26%. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) fielded 53 female candidates in 2019, compared to 54 female candidates from the Congress (12.9% of all candidates fielded that year). That year, a large number of women were fielded by Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Bihar. With 17% of the total number of candidates in each state, Goa and Manipur had the highest proportion of female candidates. In the same year, more female candidates were put up by parties like the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal and the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Odisha for the Lok Sabha elections: In Odisha, the BJD nominated 33% of female candidates, whereas in Bengal, the TMC did the same with 41%.

Data from 2020 shows that women make up no more than 13% of the Rajya Sabha's total membership, which is little less than that of the Lok Sabha. The average representation in state legislative assemblies, generally referred to as Vidhan Sabhas, is usually less than 10%.

### **Conclusion:**

As a result, the essay discusses how women's position has changed from the Rig during the Vedic Period to the present. In both the home and the community, Rig Vedic Aryan women were valued and held to a position of equality. Women's standing in society declined. Throughout the Vedic Period, women's standing declined. Nonetheless, the Post-Vedic Period saw a little improvement in the legal standing of wives, daughters, and spouses. Throughout the epic era, women's status continued to decline. During the PostVedic era, women were seen as a taboo group. Their decline was mostly caused by the dasi-system's adoption and the prohibition of intellectual and religious instruction. Although women's position was somewhat supported by Buddhism and Jainism, women's standing in society was far from ideal under British control. Hindu women suffered from child marriage, female infanticide, Purdah, Sati, and other abuses. Nearly the whole nation was affected by this ailment. Indian intellectuals were aware of the shameful social status of women as a renaissance emerged in the nineteenth century. For the sake of women, religious and social groups such as the Brahmo Samaj, the Aryan Samaj, and the Ram Krishan Mission were sought. Some advancements in women's education over the 20th century led to an improvement in women's standing in relation to national politics. Under Sarojini Naidu's leadership, women began a movement for the establishment of franchises in 1917. A new era of women actively participating in politics was ushered in by the large number of women who joined the independence movement. Women were granted the right to vote in Madras, Bombay, and the United Provinces at the elections of 1923. At that time, women were seen as men's political equals. We may have expected a sizable number of female legislators in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly as a result of all these advances in women's standing. To our astonishment, nevertheless, even the constitutional guarantee of women's equality had few effects;

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### **A Historical Perspective on the Role of Women in India's Political Development From Ancient Times to the Postmodern Era**

*Dr. Nagendra Kumar*

from 1952 to 1999, women's participation in the Lok Sabha did not surpass 49, or 9.02 percent of the overall representation.

Women's organizations and networks inside political parties and civic society must continue to support women in claiming their place in the larger political and social landscape as the movement for women's political emancipation gains traction.

In order to compel urgent institutional change and improve the representation of women in India's state assembly and parliament, women's political mobilization may be strengthened. More women must participate in these forums in order to change the discourse around governance and policymaking and move India closer to being a fully inclusive and representative democracy.

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#### A Historical Perspective on the Role of Women in India's Political Development From Ancient Times to the Postmodern Era

*Dr. Nagendra Kumar*

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