



Research Article

Beyond Symbolic Representation: Women-Led Governance and Democratic Transformation in Viksit Bharat

Dr. Sumit Kumar Minz

Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty), Post Graduate Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Sambalpur University, Jyoti Vihar, Burla, Odisha-768019 (India)



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ABSTRACT



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The vision of Viksit Bharat seeks to transform India into a developed, inclusive, and globally influential nation by 2047. However, the realisation of this vision depends not only on economic growth and technological modernisation but also on democratic inclusion, social justice, and gender-equitable governance. In this context, women-led governance has emerged as a critical dimension of sustainable development and democratic transformation. The present article critically examines the role of women's political participation in strengthening inclusive governance and achieving the broader goals of Viksit Bharat. The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach based on secondary sources, including books, journal articles, government reports, constitutional provisions, and policy documents. Drawing upon Feminist Political Theory, the Capability Approach, and Participatory Democracy Theory, the article argues that India has significantly expanded women's descriptive representation through democratic decentralisation and reservation policies, particularly in Panchayati Raj Institutions. However, substantive political empowerment continues to remain constrained by patriarchal institutional structures, proxy representation, unequal access to political authority, and intersectional inequalities related to caste, class, and region. The article further argues that women's political empowerment strengthens democratic accountability, welfare-oriented governance, and participatory development. Therefore, the realisation of Viksit Bharat requires transforming governance institutions beyond symbolic inclusion toward substantive gender equality and democratic participation.

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Introduction

The vision of Viksit Bharat has emerged as a central developmental aspiration in contemporary India, aiming to transform the country into a developed, self-reliant, inclusive, and globally influential nation by the year 2047. The idea of a "developed India" extends beyond economic growth and technological modernisation to include democratic deepening, social justice, institutional accountability, and human development. In contemporary political discourse, development is increasingly understood not merely in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), industrial expansion, or infrastructural growth, but also through enhancement of human capabilities, political participation, and equitable access to opportunities (Sen, 1999). Consequently, women's empowerment and participation in governance have become central to debates surrounding democratic development and inclusive nation-building. Women constitute nearly half of India's population, yet their representation in political institutions and decision-making structures has historically remained limited. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality under Articles 14, 15, and 16, patriarchal social norms, unequal access to education and

resources, and gendered political structures have continued to restrict women's participation in governance and public leadership (Krook & O'Brien, 2012). Indian democracy has therefore witnessed a contradiction between formal political equality and substantive political empowerment. While women possess equal voting rights and constitutional protections, their effective participation within political institutions continues to remain constrained by structural inequalities and male-dominated political cultures.

Women-led governance refers not merely to the numerical inclusion of women within political institutions but to their substantive participation in policymaking, leadership, and democratic decision-making processes. Feminist scholars argue that women's inclusion in governance broadens policy priorities and contributes to a more responsive, welfare-oriented administration (Phillips, 1995). Empirical studies indicate that women representatives frequently prioritise issues related to healthcare, sanitation, nutrition, education, gender justice, and social welfare, thereby expanding the developmental orientation of governance institutions (Chattopadhyay & Duflo 2004). At the same time, scholars such as Nivedita Menon (2012) argue that

*Corresponding Author:

✉ sumitkminz@gmail.com (S.K. Minz)

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formal legal equality alone cannot dismantle deeply embedded patriarchal structures unless accompanied by a broader transformation of social and political power relations. This distinction between formal representation and substantive empowerment remains central to understanding women's role within democratic governance in India.

Existing scholarship on women and governance has extensively examined political representation, decentralisation, democratic participation, and gender equality. Anne Phillips (1995), through the concept of the "politics of presence," argues that democratic institutions cannot remain genuinely representative without inclusion of marginalised groups, particularly women. Similarly, Carole Pateman (1970) emphasises the essential role of active citizen participation in democratic legitimacy and accountability. In the Indian context, Niraja Gopal Jayal (2013) argues that democratic citizenship remains unevenly experienced across gender and social hierarchies, thereby limiting equal participation within political institutions. Studies on Panchayati Raj Institutions further demonstrate that reservation policies significantly increased women's visibility and participation in grassroots governance (Mathew 2003). However, scholars such as Shirin Rai (2000) caution that decentralisation does not automatically transform patriarchal power relations because local institutions may continue to reproduce social inequalities and gender hierarchies.

The Capability Approach developed by Amartya Sen also provides an important framework for understanding development as the expansion of freedoms and capabilities rather than merely economic growth (Sen, 1999). From this perspective, women's political participation is an essential component of human development because it enhances agency, democratic inclusion, and access to decision-making. Similarly, Bina Agarwal (2010) argues that effective participation depends not merely on formal inclusion but also on access to institutional resources, bargaining power, and social legitimacy. These perspectives collectively suggest that meaningful women's empowerment requires transforming governance structures rather than relying solely on symbolic representation.

Despite substantial literature on women's political participation and democratic decentralisation, limited scholarly attention has been given to examining women-led governance within the broader framework of Viksit Bharat and India's developmental aspirations for 2047. Most studies discuss women's empowerment either in relation to gender equality or to local governance, while relatively few analyse how women-led governance contributes to democratic deepening, inclusive development, and sustainable nation-building. Moreover, insufficient attention has been paid to the gap between descriptive representation and substantive political authority within governance institutions.

The present article seeks to address this gap by critically examining the relationship between women-led governance and inclusive national development in India. The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach based on secondary sources including books, journal articles, government reports, constitutional provisions, and policy documents. The article is theoretically informed by Feminist Political Theory, the Capability Approach, and Participatory Democracy Theory. It argues that although India has expanded women's descriptive representation through democratic reforms and reservation policies, substantive political empowerment continues to remain constrained by patriarchal institutional structures, intersectional inequalities, and unequal access to political authority. Therefore, the realisation of Viksit Bharat requires transforming governance institutions

beyond symbolic inclusion toward substantive gender equality, democratic participation, and inclusive political leadership.

Conceptualising Women-Led Governance and Inclusive Development

The relationship between women-led governance and Viksit Bharat can be understood through theoretical perspectives that connect democratic participation, gender equality, and inclusive development. Women-led governance does not merely refer to the numerical presence of women within political institutions; rather, it signifies their substantive participation in decision-making processes, policy formulation, and institutional leadership. In contemporary democratic theory, meaningful inclusion of women is increasingly viewed as essential for strengthening democratic legitimacy, participatory governance, and sustainable development. The Capability Approach developed by Amartya Sen provides an important framework for understanding development beyond economic growth. Sen (1999) argues that development should be viewed as the expansion of substantive freedoms and human capabilities rather than merely industrial progress or economic accumulation. From this perspective, women's political participation becomes an essential component of development because it enhances agency, representation, and access to public decision-making. Similarly, Bina Agarwal (2010) argues that effective participation depends not merely on formal inclusion but also on women's bargaining power, access to institutional resources, and social legitimacy. These perspectives suggest that democratic inclusion without actual political authority may result in symbolic representation rather than substantive empowerment.

Feminist Political Theory further explains the gendered nature of political institutions. Feminist scholars argue that governance structures have historically been shaped by patriarchal power relations that marginalised women from leadership and policymaking processes. Anne Phillips (1995), through the concept of the "politics of presence," argues that democratic institutions cannot remain genuinely representative without active inclusion of marginalised groups, particularly women. However, Nivedita Menon (2012) critically observes that formal legal equality alone cannot dismantle deeply embedded patriarchal structures unless accompanied by transformation of social and institutional power relations. This distinction between descriptive and substantive representation remains central to understanding women-led governance in India. Participatory Democracy Theory also provides an important analytical framework for examining women's political participation. Carole Pateman (1970) argues that democracy becomes meaningful only when citizens actively participate in political decision-making rather than remaining passive voters. In India, democratic decentralisation through Panchayati Raj Institutions expanded opportunities for women's participation at the grassroots level. However, scholars such as Shirin Rai (2000) caution that decentralisation does not automatically democratise gender relations because local institutions often continue to reproduce caste hierarchies, patriarchal norms, and social inequalities.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives establish that women's political empowerment is not merely a question of representation but a prerequisite for democratic deepening, accountable governance, and inclusive development. At the same time, they reveal that institutional reforms alone cannot ensure meaningful empowerment unless accompanied by structural transformation of political culture and redistribution of power. Therefore, within the context of Viksit Bharat, women-led governance must be understood not as symbolic inclusion but as substantive participation capable of strengthening democratic institutions and equitable nation-building.

Women and Democratic Participation in India

Women's participation in democratic processes is widely regarded as an important indicator of political development and democratic maturity. In a representative democracy like India, equal participation of women in political institutions and decision-making processes is essential for democratic legitimacy, social justice, and inclusive governance. Although women constitute nearly 48 per cent of India's population (World Bank, 2023), their representation within formal political institutions has historically remained limited due to patriarchal social norms, unequal access to resources, and institutional barriers. The trajectory of women's democratic participation in India therefore reflects both the expansion of political inclusion and the persistence of structural inequalities.

The Indian Constitution established the formal basis for women's democratic participation through universal adult franchise and constitutional guarantees of equality under Articles 14, 15, and 16. At the time of independence, India granted equal voting rights to women despite many democracies across the world continuing to impose restrictions on women's electoral participation. Over time, women's electoral participation has increased significantly. According to the Election Commission of India (2019), women's voter turnout in the 2019 Lok Sabha election reached approximately 67.18 per cent, nearly equal to male turnout. In several states, women voters even outnumbered men, reflecting growing political awareness and electoral mobilisation among women. This phenomenon has often been described as the "feminisation of voting" in Indian politics. However, democratic participation extends beyond voting and includes contesting elections, participating in party structures, influencing policymaking, and exercising political authority. Despite growing electoral participation, women remain significantly underrepresented in legislative institutions. Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024) indicate that women constitute only around 15 per cent of the Lok Sabha, which remains below the global average for women's parliamentary representation. This reveals a major contradiction within Indian democracy where women are increasingly visible as voters but remain marginalised within formal decision-making structures.

Scholars argue that political parties function as gatekeepers of political representation by allocating fewer electoral tickets to women candidates (Krook 2010). Candidate selection is often influenced by patriarchal assumptions regarding "winnability," financial strength, and political networks, thereby restricting women's entry into legislative politics. Niraja Gopal Jayal (2013) further argues that democratic citizenship in India remains unevenly experienced across gender and social hierarchies, limiting women's substantive participation in political institutions. Women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minority communities, and economically marginalised backgrounds frequently face multiple layers of exclusion within democratic processes. Empirical studies nevertheless demonstrate that women's political participation positively influences governance outcomes. Women representatives frequently prioritise issues related to healthcare, education, nutrition, sanitation, and social welfare (Chattopadhyay & Duflo 2004). At the same time, feminist scholars such as Nivedita Menon (2012) caution that numerical inclusion alone cannot ensure substantive empowerment if patriarchal institutional structures continue to dominate political decision-making.

In the context of Viksit Bharat, women's democratic participation becomes essential for strengthening participatory governance, democratic accountability, and inclusive development. However, realisation of these objectives requires movement beyond symbolic representation toward substantive

political authority and institutional transformation within Indian democracy.

Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions

The participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) represents one of the most significant developments in India's democratic decentralisation and grassroots political transformation. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 institutionalised local self-governance and reserved not less than one-third of seats for women, including positions of chairpersons. Several states later increased women's representation to 50 per cent, significantly expanding women's representation in rural governance. According to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2023), women currently constitute more than 46 per cent of elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions, making India one of the largest examples of women's grassroots political participation.

The Panchayati Raj system is based on democratic decentralisation and participatory governance, aiming to bring governance closer to local communities. Reservation policies enabled millions of rural women, particularly from marginalised social backgrounds, to enter formal political institutions for the first time (Mathew 2003). Women's participation in PRIs challenged traditional assumptions that governance and leadership were exclusively male domains, creating new opportunities for political visibility and civic engagement in rural India. Empirical studies indicate that women representatives frequently prioritise welfare-oriented and community-centred governance. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) found that women leaders were more likely to invest in public goods related to drinking water, sanitation, healthcare, and rural infrastructure. Similarly, Beaman et al. (2009) observed that women's reservations in village councils reduced gender bias and improved public perceptions of women's leadership capabilities. Women representatives have also focused on issues such as education, nutrition, self-help groups, and rural welfare programs, thereby broadening the developmental priorities of local governance.

However, the democratic impact of reservation policies must also be critically examined. While reservations increased women's descriptive representation, substantive political empowerment often remains constrained by patriarchal institutional structures. One major challenge is the phenomenon of "*Sarpanch Pati*" politics, where elected women representatives are informally controlled by husbands or male relatives who exercise de facto authority on their behalf. In many Panchayats, women remain nominal office holders while actual decision-making power continues to rest with male family members. This demonstrates that numerical representation alone does not automatically ensure political autonomy. Women representatives in PRIs also face barriers such as low literacy levels, financial dependency, lack of political training, bureaucratic resistance, and exclusion from informal power networks. Shirin Rai (2000) argues that decentralisation does not automatically democratise gender relations because local institutions frequently reproduce existing patriarchal hierarchies. Similarly, Bina Agarwal (2010) emphasises that effective participation requires not merely formal inclusion but also access to institutional resources and bargaining power. Women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and economically marginalised communities often experience multiple layers of exclusion within local governance structures.

Despite these limitations, Panchayati Raj Institutions remain an important platform for strengthening women's political participation and democratic inclusion in India. In the context of Viksit Bharat, women-led governance at the grassroots level contributes to accountable governance, participatory democracy, and inclusive development. However, the realisation of these

objectives requires moving beyond symbolic inclusion toward substantive empowerment through institutional support, political training, and the transformation of patriarchal power relations.

Women in Parliament and Legislative Bodies

While women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has expanded considerably through reservation policies, their representation in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies continues to remain comparatively limited. The underrepresentation of women in legislative institutions reflects persistent structural inequalities within Indian politics and highlights the limitations of gender-inclusive governance at higher levels of decision-making. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and democratic rights, legislative politics in India continues to remain largely male-dominated, particularly within political parties, electoral competition, and leadership structures.

Women's representation in the Lok Sabha has gradually increased over time, yet it remains below global standards. The 2024 Lok Sabha elections witnessed a decline in the number of elected women members from 78 in 2019 to 74, indicating that women's parliamentary representation still lacks institutional consistency and political support (Chawla, 2024). This reveals a contradiction within Indian democracy: women are increasingly visible as voters and political mobilisers, yet remain inadequately represented in formal policymaking institutions. Scholars argue that political parties function as gatekeepers of political representation by allocating fewer electoral tickets to women candidates (Krook 2010). Candidate selection processes are frequently shaped by patriarchal assumptions regarding "winnability," financial strength, and political influence, thereby restricting women's entry into legislative politics. In many cases, women leaders who successfully enter Parliament or State Assemblies often belong to politically influential or elite backgrounds, raising concerns regarding caste and class privilege within representation. Zoya Hasan (2010) argues that women's political representation in India continues to be mediated through elite political networks and party structures, limiting broader democratisation of leadership opportunities.

The issue of women's representation is closely linked to democratic inclusiveness and substantive political authority. Anne Phillips (1995), through the concept of the "politics of presence," argues that democratic institutions cannot adequately represent diverse social interests unless marginalised groups are physically present within decision-making bodies. However, feminist scholars also emphasise that descriptive representation alone remains insufficient unless women representatives possess substantive political authority capable of influencing policymaking processes (Childs & Krook 2009). Thus, numerical representation without institutional power may result in symbolic inclusion rather than transformative participation. Women legislators have nevertheless contributed significantly to welfare-oriented governance and social policy debates. Research suggests that women representatives frequently prioritise issues related to healthcare, education, food security, child welfare, and gender justice (Swers, 2002). Leaders such as Indira Gandhi, Sushma Swaraj, and Mamata Banerjee have also challenged traditional assumptions regarding women's leadership capabilities. However, visibility of individual women leaders does not necessarily translate into broader gender inclusion within political institutions.

A major development in this context has been the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill, officially known as the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023, which proposes the reservation of one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for women. Although the legislation represents an

important step toward institutionalising women's representation, its implementation remains linked to future delimitation and census processes, raising concerns regarding delays in actual political empowerment. In the context of Viksit Bharat, greater participation of women in legislative institutions is essential for strengthening democratic legitimacy, gender-sensitive governance, and inclusive national development. However, the realisation of these objectives requires transforming patriarchal political structures beyond symbolic representation toward substantive political empowerment.

Gender-Sensitive Policymaking

Gender-sensitive policymaking refers to the formulation and implementation of policies that recognise the different social, economic, and political realities experienced by women and men and seek to reduce structural inequalities within society. In democratic governance, such policymaking is essential for promoting social justice, inclusive development, and equitable access to opportunities. Within the framework of Viksit Bharat, gender-sensitive governance has gained increasing importance, as inclusive national development cannot be achieved without meaningful participation and the empowerment of women in social, economic, and political life. Historically, public policymaking in India was largely shaped by patriarchal institutional structures that frequently marginalised women's experiences and concerns. Feminist scholars argue that governance institutions often reflected male-centric developmental priorities while inadequately addressing issues such as unpaid care work, maternal health, sanitation, domestic violence, nutrition, and women's economic autonomy. Devaki Jain (2005) critically argues that women in development policies are often treated as welfare beneficiaries rather than equal participants in economic and political transformation. This distinction between welfare-oriented approaches and empowerment-oriented governance remains central to understanding gender-sensitive policymaking in India.

In recent decades, the Indian state has introduced several initiatives to promote women's welfare and inclusion. Schemes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Mission Shakti, Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, and Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana have focused on education, healthcare, financial inclusion, and social welfare. According to the Ministry of Women and Child Development (2023), more than 9 crore LPG connections have been distributed under the Ujjwala Yojana, significantly benefiting rural women by reducing dependence on traditional cooking fuels. Gender budgeting has also emerged as an important mechanism for integrating gender concerns into public expenditure planning, with the Union Budget 2024–25 allocating more than ₹3 lakh crore under the Gender Budget Statement. Empirical studies further suggest that women policymakers frequently prioritise welfare-oriented issues related to healthcare, sanitation, education, food security, and social welfare (Chattopadhyay & Duflo 2004). Greater representation of women in governance therefore, contributes to broader developmental priorities and more responsive public policy.

Despite welfare-oriented interventions, women's labour force participation in India remains comparatively low, and implementation gaps continue to limit the effectiveness of policies. Policies often remain paternalistic and protective rather than transformative, treating women as recipients of state welfare instead of autonomous political and economic actors. Moreover, women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minority communities, and rural backgrounds frequently experience unequal access to state resources because of intersectional inequalities related to caste, class, region, and digital exclusion. Therefore, gender-sensitive policymaking in India requires

movement beyond symbolic welfare measures toward substantive empowerment through institutional reform, equal access to opportunities, and greater participation of women in governance and decision-making processes.

Challenges to Women's Leadership

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, democratic reforms, and increasing political participation, women in India continue to face multiple barriers in political leadership and governance. These challenges are rooted in patriarchal social structures, institutional inequalities, economic dependency, and gendered political cultures that restrict women's meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Although women's representation has expanded through reservation policies and democratic decentralisation, substantive political empowerment remains limited because political institutions continue to reproduce existing power hierarchies.

One of the most significant obstacles to women's leadership is patriarchy, which traditionally defines politics as a male-dominated sphere. Gendered social expectations often associate women primarily with domestic responsibilities, thereby restricting their mobility, financial independence, and public visibility. Nivedita Menon (2012) argues that patriarchal power structures operate not only within families but also through political and institutional systems that normalise male dominance in leadership positions. Consequently, women leaders frequently face skepticism regarding their political competence and administrative authority.

Institutional barriers within political parties further limit women's leadership opportunities. Political parties often allocate fewer electoral tickets to women candidates and prioritise financial influence, political networks, and "winnability" in candidate selection processes. Electoral politics in India also requires substantial financial resources, which disadvantages many women because of unequal access to economic capital. Zoya Hasan (2010) observes that women's political advancement in India frequently remains mediated through elite political families and dynastic networks, limiting broader democratisation of leadership opportunities.

Women leaders additionally face political violence, cyber harassment, media stereotyping, and character-based criticism. Female politicians are often evaluated through gendered expectations regarding family roles, appearance, and personal conduct rather than their policy competence. Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo (2020) argue that violence against women in politics undermines democratic equality by discouraging women's participation in public life. The expansion of digital politics and social media has further intensified online abuse and gendered disinformation targeting women leaders.

At the grassroots level, the phenomenon of "Sarpanch Pati" politics reflects the limitations of formal representation. In many Panchayats, elected women representatives remain dependent on male family members who exercise de facto authority on their behalf. This weakens women's political autonomy and demonstrates that numerical representation alone does not ensure substantive empowerment.

Critically, women's leadership is also shaped by intersectional inequalities related to caste, class, religion, region, and education. Women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minority communities, and economically marginalised backgrounds often face multiple forms of exclusion within political institutions. Shirin Rai (2000) argues that democratic institutions often reproduce social hierarchies rather than transform them. In the context of Viksit Bharat, these structural barriers pose serious challenges to inclusive governance and democratic development.

Therefore, meaningful women's empowerment requires not only representation but also institutional reform, political training, financial support, and transformation of patriarchal political culture.

Women-Led Governance and Viksit Bharat

The vision of Viksit Bharat seeks to transform India into a developed, inclusive, technologically advanced, and globally influential nation by 2047. However, the realisation of this vision depends not only on economic growth and infrastructural modernisation but also on democratic inclusion, social justice, and equitable governance. In this context, women-led governance emerges as a critical dimension of sustainable national development because democratic institutions cannot remain genuinely representative when nearly half of the population remains inadequately represented within structures of political power.

Women's political participation contributes significantly to democratic deepening and accountable governance. Studies indicate that women representatives frequently prioritise welfare-oriented issues such as healthcare, education, sanitation, food security, nutrition, and social welfare (Chattopadhyay & Duflo 2004). Greater participation of women in governance therefore broadens developmental priorities beyond conventional economic indicators and strengthens human-centered policymaking. The increasing representation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has particularly demonstrated how grassroots participation can improve local accountability, community engagement, and welfare delivery. The relationship between women's empowerment and development is closely linked with the Capability Approach developed by Amartya Sen, which defines development as expansion of freedoms and capabilities rather than merely economic growth (Sen, 1999). From this perspective, women's political participation becomes an essential component of inclusive development because it enhances democratic agency, institutional access, and social participation. Similarly, Bina Agarwal (2010) argues that effective participation requires not merely formal inclusion but also access to institutional resources and bargaining power. Thus, women-led governance contributes not only to gender equality but also to democratic legitimacy and sustainable development.

Despite expansion of women's descriptive representation through reservation policies and democratic reforms, substantive empowerment remains constrained by patriarchal institutional structures, unequal access to political authority, and intersectional inequalities. Women continue to remain underrepresented in Parliament, political parties, and higher decision-making institutions. In many cases, governance structures accommodate women symbolically without fundamentally redistributing political power. Nivedita Menon (2012) argues that formal inclusion alone cannot transform deeply embedded patriarchal systems unless accompanied by broader institutional and social transformation.

Moreover, the discourse of development itself must be critically interrogated. Economic modernisation without democratic inclusion risks reproducing existing social inequalities. Issues such as digital exclusion, gendered labour inequalities, political violence, and unequal access to education continue to limit women's substantive participation in governance and development processes. Therefore, realisation of Viksit Bharat requires movement beyond symbolic representation toward substantive political empowerment, gender-just institutions, and participatory governance capable of ensuring equitable nation-building and democratic transformation.

Conclusion

The vision of Viksit Bharat represents not merely an aspiration for economic modernisation but a broader project of democratic transformation, inclusive governance, and equitable nation-building. The present study demonstrates that women-led governance occupies a central position within this developmental framework because meaningful national development cannot be achieved without equal participation of women in political and decision-making institutions. Women's political participation strengthens democratic legitimacy, welfare-oriented governance, social accountability, and participatory development, all of which are essential components of an inclusive and sustainable democracy. The study further reveals that constitutional reforms, democratic decentralisation, and reservation policies have significantly expanded women's descriptive representation, particularly within Panchayati Raj Institutions. Women's increasing visibility in governance has challenged patriarchal assumptions about leadership and broadened policy priorities in healthcare, education, sanitation, nutrition, and social welfare. However, the article critically argues that numerical inclusion alone does not automatically ensure substantive empowerment. Women continue to face structural barriers such as patriarchal political culture, proxy representation, institutional exclusion, financial dependency, political violence, and intersectional inequalities related to caste, class, and region.

The analysis, therefore, highlights a persistent contradiction within Indian democracy: democratic inclusion has expanded institutionally faster than structurally. Although women's participation as voters and representatives has increased substantially, effective political authority and decision-making power remain unevenly distributed within governance institutions. In many cases, women continue to remain symbolically included while patriarchal power structures retain substantive control over political processes. Meaningful women's empowerment, therefore, requires not merely reservation policies or symbolic inclusion but structural transformation of governance institutions through equal access to political authority, institutional resources, and decision-making processes. The realisation of Viksit Bharat depends not only on economic growth and technological advancement but also on the democratisation of political institutions capable of ensuring gender-just and participatory governance. A developed India cannot emerge from economically modern institutions governed through socially unequal power structures. The true success of Viksit Bharat will therefore be determined by the extent to which Indian democracy transforms women from subjects of welfare into equal architects of political power, governance, and national development.

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