



Tokenism or Transformation? Gender and Marginal Politics in Indian Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the relationship between tokenism and transformation in the context of gender and marginal politics in Indian democracy. Moving beyond a binary framework, it argues that these processes coexist in a dynamic and often contradictory manner. Drawing on feminist political theory and the concept of intersectionality, the study analyses how state policies—ranging from political reservations and welfare schemes to legal reforms—have sought to promote inclusion among women, Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalized groups. Using empirical insights from case studies such as Panchayati Raj institutions, self-help groups, and women-centric welfare initiatives, the article demonstrates that while many interventions begin as symbolic or instrumental measures, they can generate pathways for gradual empowerment. However, the transformative potential of these policies is frequently constrained by entrenched structures of patriarchy, caste hierarchy, and socio-economic inequality, as well as by implementation gaps and political instrumentalization. The findings suggest that Indian democracy produces hybrid outcomes, where inclusion is both real and limited. The article concludes by emphasizing the need for deeper structural reforms and stronger grassroots agency to move from tokenistic inclusion toward substantive and sustainable democratic

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transformation.

Introduction

The trajectory of Indian democracy has long been intertwined with questions of inclusion, representation, and social justice. Over time, these concerns have moved from the margins of political discourse to its very centre, particularly in relation to communities historically excluded from power. It is within this evolving democratic landscape that the frameworks of *gender politics* and *marginal politics* acquire analytical significance. Rather than treating politics as a neutral arena, these perspectives foreground how power is structured, negotiated, and reproduced through social hierarchies.

Gender politics, in this sense, is not confined to the presence or absence of women in formal institutions. It extends to the deeper ways in which political processes are shaped by gendered norms, expectations, and asymmetries of power. Similarly, marginal politics draws attention to the experiences of those positioned at the edges of social and economic life - Dalits, Adivasis, religious minorities, and other disadvantaged groups-whose engagement with the state is often mediated by structural inequalities rather than formal rights alone (Chandra, 2004; Guru, 2009). Together, these frameworks shift the focus from abstract ideals of democracy to its lived and contested realities.

Yet, the promise of equality embedded in India's constitutional framework sits uneasily alongside persistent disparities. Despite affirmative action, legal safeguards, and an expanding welfare apparatus, hierarchies of caste, class, and gender continue to shape access to resources and opportunities in uneven ways. In response, the state has, particularly since the late twentieth century, expanded its repertoire of interventions-ranging from targeted welfare schemes and identity-based reservations to legal reforms aimed at protection and inclusion (Kabeer, 2005). These initiatives are frequently articulated through the language of empowerment and inclusive development, suggesting a shift toward a more participatory democratic order.

However, the actual impact of these measures remains contested. A central tension runs through existing scholarship: whether such policies produce meaningful change in the lives of marginalized populations or whether they operate largely at the level of symbolism. The concept of *tokenism* becomes useful here, capturing forms of inclusion that are visible yet limited-where representation does not necessarily translate into redistribution of power (Young, 2000). In contrast, *transformation* implies a more fundamental reworking of social and political relations, enabling individuals not merely to be present, but to exercise agency and influence.

This tension is not merely theoretical; it is reflected in everyday governance and policy outcomes. For example, while reservations for women in local government have undeniably increased their numerical presence, the extent to which this presence translates into independent decision-making remains uneven (Ban & Rao, 2008). Likewise, welfare initiatives targeting marginalized communities often succeed in expanding access to basic services, yet fall short of addressing the deeper structural conditions that produce inequality in the first place (Drèze & Sen, 2013). These examples suggest that inclusion, while necessary, is not sufficient.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine more closely how gender and marginal politics operate within Indian democracy. It asks: to what extent do contemporary policies and political practices enable substantive transformation, and to what extent do they reproduce tokenistic inclusion under the guise of empowerment?

The argument advanced here is that the reality lies somewhere in between. Indian democracy does not present a clear shift from exclusion to empowerment; rather, it reveals a layered and uneven process in which symbolic gestures and material gains coexist. In some contexts, policies that appear tokenistic may open up spaces for gradual change, while in others, structural constraints continue to limit their transformative potential. What emerges, therefore, is a hybrid condition—one marked by partial advances, persistent inequalities, and ongoing negotiation.

By situating this inquiry within both theoretical debates and empirical observations, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of democratic deepening in India. In doing so, it also raises broader questions about the capacity—and limits—of state-led initiatives to bring about meaningful social transformation in deeply stratified societies.

Conceptual Framework

Any meaningful analysis of gender and marginal politics in India requires more than descriptive accounts of policies or representation; it demands conceptual clarity about the nature of inclusion itself. In particular, distinguishing between *tokenism* and *transformation* is essential for evaluating whether democratic processes merely accommodate marginalized groups symbolically or enable deeper shifts in power relations. To develop this distinction, the present study draws on insights from feminist political theory and the framework of intersectionality, both of which complicate conventional understandings of equality and participation.

Tokenism, at a basic level, refers to forms of inclusion that are visible but limited in substance. It often takes the shape of numerical representation—reserved seats, quotas, or targeted appointments—without a corresponding expansion of decision-making authority. In such cases, the presence of marginalized individuals within institutions may signal inclusivity, yet the underlying structures of power remain largely intact. Rather than redistributing authority, tokenism tends to stabilize existing hierarchies by giving them a more inclusive appearance (Young, 2000). In the Indian context, this dynamic can be observed where women or members of disadvantaged communities occupy formal positions but operate within constraints imposed by entrenched social norms, local power brokers, or administrative control.

Transformation, by contrast, points to a more substantive reconfiguration of social and political arrangements. It is not limited to who participates, but extends to how institutions function and whose voices shape outcomes. A transformative process involves shifts in agency, access, and autonomy—allowing historically excluded groups to influence decisions in meaningful ways. This includes not only redistributive changes, such as access to resources, but also recognition of dignity and voice within public life. Importantly, transformation is rarely immediate; it unfolds over time through institutional change, social negotiation, and political contestation. In this sense, it is better understood as a process than as a fixed outcome.

Feminist political theory provides a crucial lens for unpacking these dynamics. It challenges the assumption that formal equality—such as equal rights or legal inclusion—automatically leads to substantive equality in practice. Feminist scholars have long argued that political institutions are not neutral arenas; they are shaped by gendered norms that influence both participation and outcomes (Kabeer, 2005). As a result, even well-intentioned policies aimed at women's empowerment may fail to achieve their goals if they do not address the social and cultural constraints that limit women's agency. This perspective shifts attention away from mere representation toward the quality, depth, and effectiveness of participation.

A key insight from feminist thought is the understanding of power as relational rather than purely institutional. Power operates not only through formal rules and structures but also through everyday practices, expectations, and social interactions. This means that the presence of marginalized groups within institutions does not automatically translate into influence; it depends on how power is negotiated in specific contexts. Consequently, evaluating inclusion requires attention to both formal mechanisms and informal dynamics.

The framework of intersectionality further deepens this analysis by highlighting the multiple and overlapping dimensions of marginalization. First articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality

emphasizes that categories such as gender, caste, class, and religion do not operate in isolation. Instead, they intersect to produce distinct and often compounded forms of disadvantage. This insight is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where caste hierarchies remain deeply embedded and interact with gender and economic inequalities in complex ways.

An intersectional approach challenges the tendency to treat social groups as homogeneous. For instance, the experiences of women are far from uniform; an upper-caste, urban woman is likely to encounter very different opportunities and constraints compared to a Dalit or Adivasi woman in a rural setting. Policies that overlook these differences risk reproducing inequality even as they aim to address it. Thus, intersectionality not only refines our understanding of marginalization but also provides a critical tool for assessing the effectiveness of policy interventions.

The work of Iris Marion Young (2000) complements these perspectives by offering a normative framework for inclusive democracy. Young critiques models of democracy that emphasize formal equality while neglecting the structural conditions that inhibit participation. Her concept of a “politics of difference” argues for the recognition of group-based identities and the need to incorporate diverse voices into decision-making processes. This approach is particularly useful in evaluating whether democratic institutions genuinely accommodate diversity or simply absorb it without altering dominant norms.

Similarly, Crenshaw’s critique of single-axis analysis underscores the limitations of policy frameworks that address only one dimension of inequality at a time. By ignoring the intersections of caste, gender, and class, such approaches often fail to reach those most in need of support. This reinforces the importance of multidimensional analysis in distinguishing between symbolic inclusion and substantive change.

Taken together, these conceptual tools—tokenism, transformation, feminist critique, and intersectionality—provide a layered framework for analysing gender and marginal politics in India. They allow us to move beyond surface-level indicators of inclusion and instead interrogate the depth and quality of democratic participation. More importantly, they draw attention to the conditions under which inclusion can evolve into empowerment, as well as the structural constraints that may limit this process. In doing so, the framework sets the stage for a more nuanced examination of how democratic institutions both enable and restrict transformative change.

Historical Context of Gender and Marginal Politics in India

Understanding the contemporary dynamics of gender and marginal politics in India requires situating them within a broader historical trajectory that spans the colonial period, the post-independence constitutional

framework, and the transformative political developments of the late twentieth century. This historical lens reveals that while inclusion has been a recurring concern, its meaning and practice has evolved in response to shifting political, social, and economic contexts.

Pre-Independence: Women and Marginal Groups in the Nationalist Movement

The participation of women in India's nationalist movement marked a significant moment in the politicization of gender. Leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Kasturba Gandhi played visible roles in anti-colonial struggles, challenging prevailing norms that confined women to the domestic sphere. The mobilization of women during movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Quit India Movement symbolized a reconfiguration of gender roles, albeit within the broader framework of nationalist objectives (Forbes, 1996).

However, this participation was often mediated by patriarchal assumptions. Women were frequently represented as symbols of the nation-embodiments of sacrifice and moral virtue-rather than as autonomous political agents. Consequently, their inclusion in nationalist politics did not necessarily translate into a sustained challenge to gender hierarchies. Similarly, marginalized communities such as Dalits and Adivasis engaged with the nationalist movement in complex ways, often articulating their own demands for social justice and representation. The efforts of B.R. Ambedkar underscored the limitations of a nationalist discourse that prioritized political independence over social equality (Omvedt, 1994).

Post-Independence: Constitutional Vision and Institutional Frameworks

The adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950 marked a foundational moment in the institutionalization of equality and social justice. The Constitution enshrined principles of non-discrimination, equality before the law, and affirmative action for historically disadvantaged groups. Provisions such as reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in legislatures, educational institutions, and public employment reflected a commitment to redressing historical injustices (Austin, 1999).

In terms of gender, the Constitution guaranteed equal rights to women, including universal adult franchise, which placed India ahead of many other democracies at the time. However, the formal recognition of equality did not automatically dismantle entrenched social hierarchies. For instance, despite legal equality, female labour force participation remains low-hovering around 25% according to Periodic Labour Force Survey data (PLFS 2022–23). Similarly, gender disparities persist in access to assets and employment opportunities.

Over time, the Indian state expanded its role through welfare policies aimed at promoting social and economic development. National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data indicate gradual improvements in literacy and consumption levels among marginalized groups, yet persistent inequalities remain across caste and gender lines (NSSO, various rounds). The shift toward targeted welfare reflects an acknowledgment of structural inequalities, but it also introduced new forms of state-society interaction, often mediated by bureaucratic and political processes (Drèze & Sen, 2013).

A significant milestone in deepening democratic participation was the introduction of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–93), which institutionalized decentralization and mandated reservations for women and marginalized groups in local governance. Empirical evidence shows that women now constitute over 46% of elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions across India, indicating a substantial increase in grassroots political participation (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2023). These reforms brought issues of gender and marginality into the domain of everyday governance (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).

Evolution of Welfare and Gender-Focused Policies

From the late twentieth century onwards, welfare policies in India began to incorporate a more explicit focus on gender and social inclusion. Programs related to education, health, livelihood, and financial inclusion sought to address the multidimensional nature of deprivation. For example, NFHS-5 (2019–21) data show that female literacy has improved to over 70%, and institutional births have increased significantly, reflecting better access to healthcare (NFHS-5, 2019–21).

Similarly, women's participation in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) has expanded under programs like the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), contributing to financial inclusion. However, the effectiveness of these policies remains uneven. While they have improved basic indicators, critics argue that many programs remain limited in their transformative potential. The emphasis on welfare delivery, rather than structural change, often results in forms of inclusion that are conditional and mediated by existing power relations (Kabeer, 2005).

Rise of Identity Politics (1990s Onwards)

The 1990s marked a decisive turning point in Indian politics with the rise of identity-based mobilization. The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations, which expanded reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs), intensified debates around caste, representation, and social justice. This period

also witnessed the consolidation of regional parties and the increasing salience of caste and community identities in electoral politics (Jaffrelot, 2003).

Election data further highlight this transformation. Women's voter turnout has steadily increased, reaching parity and even surpassing male turnout in several states during the 2019 and 2024 general elections (Election Commission of India, 2019; 2024). This trend indicates a growing political agency among women voters, even if representation in legislative bodies remains relatively low (around 15% in the Lok Sabha, 2024).

Identity politics created new opportunities for marginalized groups to assert their claims and influence political outcomes. It facilitated the emergence of leaders and parties representing Dalits, backward classes, and other marginalized communities. At the same time, it also led to the fragmentation of political discourse and the instrumentalization of identity for electoral gain.

For women, the rise of identity politics produced mixed outcomes. On the one hand, it opened spaces for articulation of gender-specific concerns within broader social movements. On the other hand, gender issues were often subordinated to caste or community-based agendas. This tension highlights the importance of an intersectional approach in understanding the dynamics of marginal politics.

Critical Reflection

The historical trajectory of gender and marginal politics in India reveals a pattern of incremental inclusion accompanied by persistent structural constraints. Empirical data from NFHS, NSSO, and election statistics demonstrate that while there have been measurable improvements in health, education, and political participation, structural inequalities in employment, representation, and social power persist.

This historical context underscores the central argument of this study: that the evolution of gender and marginal politics in India cannot be understood in binary terms of success or failure. Instead, it reflects a layered process in which symbolic inclusion, policy-driven change, and grassroots mobilization interact in complex ways. Such an understanding is essential for evaluating whether contemporary developments represent genuine transformation or continue to reproduce tokenistic forms of inclusion.

State Policies: Welfare, Representation, and Inclusion

Debates on gender and marginal politics in India often return to a central tension: do state policies genuinely redistribute power, or do they largely extend symbolic inclusion? Since independence, the Indian state has relied on a mix of constitutional guarantees, political reservations, welfare programmes, and legal reforms to

address entrenched inequalities. While these interventions are framed in the language of justice and empowerment, their outcomes are uneven and frequently shaped by the very hierarchies they seek to dismantle.

Gender and marginality operate through overlapping structures-caste, class, religion, and region-making policy outcomes inherently uneven. As a result, increased participation or access does not always translate into control over resources or decision-making. What emerges, therefore, is not a linear story of empowerment but a layered process where inclusion and constraint coexist.

This section examines three arenas of state intervention-political representation, welfare provisioning, and legal reform-to argue that while access has widened, structural transformation remains partial and contested.

(a) Political Representation

Political reservation has been one of the most visible tools for expanding inclusion. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments significantly increased women's presence in local governance, in some states reaching nearly half of all elected representatives. This shift has altered the social composition of political spaces and, in certain cases, influenced local priorities-especially in sectors like health, education, and basic infrastructure.

Yet, the meaning of this inclusion is not straightforward. In many instances, women's authority is mediated by male relatives or local elites, pointing to a gap between holding office and exercising power. Representation, in such cases, enhances visibility without fully displacing entrenched control over decision-making.

The recent constitutional provision for reserving seats for women in Parliament and state assemblies signals an expansion of this logic to higher levels. However, delays in implementation and the continued dominance of established political networks suggest that numerical inclusion alone may not yield substantive change. Representation, while necessary, appears insufficient unless supported by broader shifts in socio-economic and institutional conditions.

(b) Welfare Schemes

Welfare has become a central instrument through which the state engages with women and marginalized groups. Schemes promoting girls' education, financial inclusion, and household welfare have expanded access to basic resources and improved certain social indicators. Initiatives such as conditional cash transfers or subsidized services have, in many contexts, eased immediate constraints on women's lives.

At the same time, welfare operates within a political framework. The targeting and delivery of benefits are often intertwined with electoral strategies, raising questions about whether such schemes function as rights-based entitlements or as instruments of political mobilization. This blurring of welfare and patronage complicates the idea of empowerment.

There is also a deeper limitation. Many programmes position women primarily as recipients-mothers, caregivers, or household managers-rather than as autonomous economic or political actors. As a result, while welfare may improve living conditions, it does not always disrupt the underlying distribution of power. In some cases, it may even reinforce existing roles, making inclusion conditional rather than transformative.

(c) Legal Reforms

Legal reforms form another key pillar of state intervention, with laws addressing domestic violence, workplace harassment, and caste-based atrocities marking important normative commitments. These frameworks signal a recognition of structural injustice and create formal avenues for redress. In this sense, law serves both a practical and symbolic function-offering protection while affirming rights.

However, the distance between legal provision and lived reality remains significant. Enforcement is often uneven, and access to justice is shaped by social position, awareness, and institutional responsiveness. For many, especially those at the intersection of caste and gender disadvantage, legal remedies remain difficult to access.

This gap points to a broader limitation of legal reform. Laws can enable change, but they cannot by themselves transform the social norms and power relations that sustain inequality. Their effectiveness depends on parallel processes-social mobilization, institutional accountability, and shifts in public attitudes.

Taken together, these domains reveal a common pattern. State policies in India have expanded access, visibility, and formal rights for women and marginalized groups. Yet, their transformative capacity is constrained by the persistence of social hierarchies and the political logic within which they operate. The result is not the absence of change, but a partial and uneven reconfiguration-where empowerment advances, but within limits set by existing structures.

Case Studies: Ground Realities of Gender and Marginal Politics

To move beyond policy claims, it is necessary to look at how state interventions play out on the ground. Drawing on survey data (NFHS), electoral statistics, and program-level evidence, this section examines

whether gender-focused initiatives translate into substantive empowerment or remain structured forms of participation shaped by existing hierarchies.

Welfare Expansion and Political Mobilization

Recent years have seen a marked expansion of women-focused welfare schemes across states, including initiatives such as Kanyashree and income-support programmes like Lakshmir Bhandar. These have widened the reach of the state and brought more women into formal systems of banking and service delivery. NFHS-5 data show high levels of bank account ownership and growing access to mobile phones among women, indicating progress in financial and digital inclusion (IIPS & ICF, 2021).

Yet, these gains sit alongside persistent structural limits. Only a small proportion of women engaged in work receive cash wages, reflecting the continued dominance of informal and unpaid labour (IIPS & ICF, 2021). Ownership of land and productive assets also remains low, restricting economic autonomy. Social indicators show gradual improvement-such as a decline in child marriage rates-but these changes are uneven and slow (IIPS, 2023).

Electoral trends add another layer to this picture. Women's voter turnout has risen steadily and, in several elections, now matches or exceeds that of men (ECI, 2021). This has encouraged political parties to actively court women voters through targeted welfare. What emerges is a pattern where welfare expansion and electoral mobilization reinforce each other.

However, this linkage complicates the idea of empowerment. While welfare enhances access and visibility, it often does not alter deeper inequalities in work, assets, or decision-making. Instead, it may foster a form of mediated citizenship, where engagement with the state is structured through benefits rather than independent agency.

Self-Help Groups: Collective Action within Limits

Self-help groups (SHGs) have become central to rural development strategies, mobilizing millions of women under programmes such as the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (Ministry of Rural Development, 2022). Evidence suggests that SHG participation can improve access to credit, strengthen local networks, and enhance women's role in household decisions. Studies linking NFHS data with SHG presence also indicate better outcomes in areas like maternal health and basic welfare (Saha et al., 2021).

At the same time, these gains are bounded. Economic activities linked to SHGs are often concentrated in low-return sectors, limiting upward mobility. Even where income increases, control over that income may remain embedded within household power structures.

There is also an institutional dimension. SHGs frequently operate within state-supported frameworks, which provide resources but also shape priorities and decision-making. Increasingly, these networks are used for policy outreach and community mobilization, blurring the line between empowerment and governance delivery.

Thus, SHGs expand capabilities, but within a structured environment. They enable participation, yet do not fully escape the constraints of local hierarchies and institutional control.

Women in Panchayats: Presence and Power

Political reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions have dramatically increased women's presence in local governance, with over a million women holding elected positions (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2020). This has altered the social composition of political spaces and, in some cases, shifted policy attention toward everyday concerns such as water, sanitation, and education (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).

However, this expansion at the local level contrasts with limited representation in higher political institutions, where women remain underrepresented (ECI, 2021). Even within Panchayats, authority is uneven. Instances of proxy representation-where male relatives exercise influence-point to the gap between formal office and actual control (Jaffrelot, 2003).

Despite these constraints, participation itself matters. The presence of women in governance has begun to reshape social expectations, even if slowly. Over time, such exposure can contribute to shifts in norms, though it does not automatically translate into independent political power.

Analytical Synthesis

Taken together, the evidence suggests neither a simple success story nor a failure. Instead, it points to a layered outcome:

Signs of Change

- Wider access to banking, welfare, and collective platforms (IIPS & ICF, 2021; Ministry of Rural Development, 2022)

- Improvements in select social indicators such as education and child marriage (IIPS, 2023)
- Large-scale entry of women into local political institutions (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2020)

Enduring Constraints

- Limited participation in paid and formal employment (IIPS & ICF, 2021)
- Weak presence in higher levels of political power (ECI, 2021)
- Continued reliance on welfare structures
- Persistence of caste and patriarchal hierarchies

Across these domains, participation is rarely autonomous. It is shaped by state programmes, electoral strategies, and social norms. Women are present in institutions and programmes, but their agency is often negotiated within these frameworks.

Conclusion of Case Evidence

The empirical picture resists a binary reading of tokenism versus transformation. State policies have undeniably expanded opportunities and participation, yet their effects remain uneven and conditional. What emerges is a form of “mediated empowerment,” where inclusion is real but circumscribed-enabled by the state, yet limited by enduring structural inequalities.

Tokenism in Practice: Limits of Inclusion in Indian Democracy

Although state policies in India have widened the arena of inclusion, much of this expansion operates within what can be described as a tokenistic framework. Inclusion, in many instances, is visible and measurable, yet it does not consistently translate into control over decisions, resources, or institutional power. The result is a pattern where participation is enabled, but its depth remains constrained.

Representation Without Authority

One of the clearest sites of this tension is political representation. Reservations in local governance have brought large numbers of women into elected positions, altering the face of grassroots politics. Yet, the exercise of authority often remains uneven.

The persistence of “proxy” leadership-where male relatives informally guide or control decision-making-reveals the limits of formal inclusion (Jaffrelot, 2003). In such contexts, occupying office does not

necessarily mean exercising power. Rather, representation can function as a layer placed over existing hierarchies, leaving their core largely intact.

At higher levels of politics, the slow pace of women's entry into legislatures further underscores this gap. Even when policy commitments exist, their implementation is delayed or diluted, suggesting that inclusion is negotiated rather than fully embraced. Representation, therefore, risks becoming symbolic when it is not accompanied by shifts in authority.

Uneven Access and Elite Capture

Tokenism also appears in the way benefits are distributed. Policies designed for marginalized groups often pass through local social and political filters, which shape who actually gains. Access to welfare or development programmes is rarely neutral; it is mediated by caste position, local networks, and administrative familiarity (Chandra, 2004).

As a result, relatively better-off sections within marginalized categories are often better placed to secure benefits. Those at the margins -particularly women facing multiple layers of disadvantage-may remain excluded despite formal eligibility.

Even participatory platforms such as self-help groups reflect this pattern. While presented as inclusive, they tend to draw in individuals who already possess a minimum level of social or economic capital. What emerges, then, is not exclusion in an absolute sense, but a graded inclusion-one that reproduces internal hierarchies within target groups.

Continuity of Gender Norms

Policy-driven inclusion has also had limited impact on everyday gender relations. Many welfare schemes recognize women as beneficiaries but do not fundamentally alter their position within households or communities. Access to resources improves, yet control over those resources often remains negotiated within existing power structures.

In practice, this means that women are incorporated into development processes primarily in roles aligned with caregiving and household management. Such inclusion, while beneficial in immediate terms, does little to redistribute labour or authority. As Kabeer (2005) suggests, this reflects a form of instrumental inclusion, where women are valued for their utility within policy frameworks rather than as autonomous actors.

There is also a cumulative effect: participation in welfare programmes, local governance, or collective groups often adds responsibilities without reducing existing burdens. Inclusion, in this sense, can coexist with continued subordination, producing a layered rather than transformative change.

Narratives of Empowerment

Tokenism is sustained not only through institutions but also through narratives. Political discourse and media representations frequently highlight success stories-women leaders, beneficiaries, or entrepreneurs as evidence of broader transformation.

While such cases are important, they tend to foreground exceptions rather than structural patterns. By emphasizing visible achievements, these narratives create a sense of progress that may obscure persistent inequalities. Empowerment becomes something that is seen and celebrated, even when it is unevenly distributed.

This narrative framing also serves political purposes. Welfare schemes are often presented as markers of empowerment, reinforcing their legitimacy and electoral appeal. In this process, visibility can substitute for depth, and perception can stand in for substantive change.

Rethinking Tokenism

Taken together, these patterns suggest that tokenism in India is not simply a failure of policy but a particular mode of inclusion. It expands access and participation while operating within limits set by social hierarchies, institutional capacities, and political incentives.

This form of inclusion is structured rather than accidental. It allows the state to respond to demands for representation and welfare without fundamentally unsettling existing distributions of power. As a result, gains are real but partial-shaped as much by constraint as by progress.

Conclusion of Section

In practice, tokenism appears as a gap between presence and power, access and control. Women and marginalized groups are increasingly visible within political and developmental arenas, yet their ability to shape outcomes remains uneven. Inclusion, therefore, is not absent-but it is mediated, negotiated, and bounded by enduring structural conditions.

Signs of Transformation: Emerging Pathways of Empowerment

While the limitations of tokenism remain evident, it would be analytically incomplete to overlook the significant-albeit uneven-processes of transformation unfolding within Indian democracy. State interventions, socio-economic shifts, and grassroots mobilizations have collectively contributed to new configurations of participation, agency, and visibility for women and marginalized communities. These developments, though not uniformly transformative, indicate the emergence of incremental and layered forms of empowerment that complicate a purely pessimistic reading of inclusion.

Expanding Political Participation of Women

One of the most visible indicators of transformation is the steady rise in women's political participation, both as voters and representatives. Data from the Election Commission of India demonstrate a remarkable increase in women's voter turnout over the past two decades, with female turnout equalling or even surpassing male turnout in several state and national elections (Election Commission of India [ECI], 2021). This trend reflects not only improved access to electoral processes but also the consolidation of women as an autonomous political constituency.

At the institutional level, the reservation of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has facilitated the entry of over one million women into local governance structures. While the phenomenon of proxy representation remains a concern, longitudinal evidence suggests that repeated exposure to political office has cumulative effects. Experimental and panel studies indicate that women leaders, over time, exhibit greater policy engagement, improved administrative competence, and increased responsiveness to public goods provision (Beaman et al., 2012).

Thus, political participation must be understood not merely as descriptive representation but as a dynamic process of capability formation, wherein institutional access gradually translates into substantive engagement.

Rise of Grassroots Leadership and Collective Agency

Beyond formal political arenas, the proliferation of grassroots institutions-particularly self-help groups (SHGs) and community-based organizations-has created alternative spaces for empowerment. These platforms enable women to engage in collective decision-making, financial management, and local governance, thereby fostering forms of agency that extend beyond individual advancement.

Empirical studies based on National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and independent field research suggest that women participating in SHGs are significantly more likely to engage in public affairs and community deliberations (Saha et al., 2021; NSSO, 2019). These groups function as sites of social learning, where women acquire financial literacy, leadership skills, and networks of mutual support.

Importantly, grassroots leadership often emerges outside traditional elite structures, enabling the articulation of subaltern interests. Women leaders at the local level frequently act as intermediaries between the state and marginalized communities, facilitating access to welfare schemes and addressing localized concerns. While constrained by structural inequalities, such leadership represents a gradual redistribution of voice and visibility in the political sphere.

Shifts in Social Norms: Education, Mobility, and Voice

Transformation is also evident in the gradual reconfiguration of gender norms, particularly in relation to education, mobility, and decision-making. Data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21) indicate substantial improvements in female literacy rates, school enrolment, and median age at marriage (International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS] & ICF, 2021). For instance, the proportion of women aged 20–24 married before the age of 18 has declined significantly compared to earlier survey rounds, reflecting delayed transitions into traditional gender roles.

In addition, NFHS data reveal that a growing proportion of women participate in household decision-making, including matters related to healthcare, major purchases, and mobility (IIPS & ICF, 2021). These indicators suggest an expansion of what Amartya Sen conceptualizes as “agency freedom,” where individuals gain the capacity to make meaningful choices.

Changes in mobility and public presence further reinforce this trend. Women’s increasing participation in education, employment, and political activities challenges entrenched norms of seclusion and dependency. However, these shifts remain uneven across regions, castes, and classes, highlighting the intersectional nature of social transformation.

Digital Inclusion and the Expansion of Awareness

The rapid expansion of digital infrastructure has introduced new dimensions to the empowerment process. Access to mobile phones, internet connectivity, and digital financial systems has enhanced women’s ability to access information, government services, and economic opportunities.

NFHS-5 data show a significant rise in women's ownership of mobile phones and access to bank accounts, particularly in the context of Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) schemes (IIPS & ICF, 2021). These developments indicate a convergence of digital and financial inclusion, which has the potential to reduce intermediary dependence and increase autonomy.

Moreover, digital platforms have facilitated new forms of civic and political engagement. Women are increasingly using social media and online networks to articulate concerns, mobilize support, and challenge discriminatory practices. This emergence of "networked citizenship" expands the terrain of participation beyond formal institutions.

Nevertheless, the digital divide remains a critical constraint. Gender gaps in internet access, as well as disparities between rural and urban areas, continue to limit the transformative potential of digital technologies (NSSO, 2019). As such, digital inclusion represents both an opportunity and a site of inequality.

Critical Synthesis: Transformation as a Gradual and Contested Process

The evidence presented above suggests that transformation in Indian democracy is best understood as a gradual, non-linear, and contested process. It is characterized by:

- Incremental increases in political participation and institutional access
- Emergent forms of grassroots leadership and collective agency
- Measurable but uneven shifts in social norms and gender relations
- Expanding, yet unequal, access to digital and informational resources

Crucially, these developments do not displace tokenism; rather, they coexist with it. Transformative outcomes often emerge within the very structures that reproduce inequality, leading to hybrid and context-dependent forms of empowerment.

This coexistence underscores the importance of moving beyond binary frameworks of success and failure. Instead, transformation should be conceptualized as an ongoing process shaped by the interaction between state policies, social hierarchies, and individual agency.

Conclusion of Section

The signs of transformation in gender and marginal politics in India point toward a slow but discernible reconfiguration of power relations. While structural inequalities—rooted in patriarchy, caste, and class—remain deeply entrenched, the expansion of political participation, the rise of grassroots leadership, and the spread of education and digital awareness are creating new pathways for empowerment.

Transformation, therefore, should not be understood as a singular or complete outcome, but as a layered and evolving process. It is within this dynamic and contested space that the future trajectory of inclusive democracy in India will be shaped.

Challenges and Contradictions: Gender and Marginal Politics in India

Despite visible gains in representation, welfare outreach, and legal reform, the trajectory of gender and marginal politics in India remains deeply uneven. The coexistence of progressive policy frameworks with entrenched social hierarchies produces a complex and often contradictory landscape. This section critically examines four interrelated challenges that constrain the transformative potential of inclusion, highlighting the persistence of structural inequalities, institutional limitations, and political instrumentalization.

Persistence of Patriarchy and Caste Hierarchy

At the structural core of Indian society lies the enduring influence of patriarchy and caste-based stratification. These systems function not merely as cultural residues but as institutionalized forms of power that regulate access to resources, mobility, and decision-making authority.

Empirical data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, 2022) indicate that female labour force participation in India remains persistently low, particularly in rural areas, and is largely concentrated in informal and unpaid sectors. This reinforces economic dependency and limits women's bargaining power within households and communities. Simultaneously, caste continues to mediate access to education, employment, and state resources. Dalit and Adivasi women, in particular, experience “triple marginalization” at the intersection of caste, class, and gender (Deshpande, 2011).

Importantly, formal political inclusion has not fundamentally disrupted these hierarchies. Evidence from Panchayati Raj Institutions suggests that many women representatives operate within patriarchal constraints, often mediated by male relatives—a phenomenon widely described as “proxy representation” (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). This underscores a critical limitation: numerical representation does not automatically translate into substantive empowerment when underlying social relations remain intact.

Implementation Gaps and the Limits of State Capacity

A central contradiction in India's governance framework lies in the persistent gap between policy formulation and implementation. While the state has introduced a broad spectrum of gender-sensitive and inclusive policies, their impact is frequently mediated—and often diluted—by administrative inefficiencies, local power structures, and uneven state capacity.

For example, although NFHS-5 (2019–21) data show significant improvements in institutional deliveries and maternal health indicators, disparities remain pronounced across regions, income groups, and caste categories (International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS] & ICF, 2021). Similarly, access to welfare schemes is often contingent on bureaucratic navigation, documentation, and local-level discretion, which disproportionately disadvantage the most marginalized.

Legal protections also suffer from weak enforcement. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2022) reveal low conviction rates in cases related to caste-based violence and crimes against women, reflecting procedural delays and institutional biases. This aligns with Lipsky's (1980) concept of "street-level bureaucracy," where frontline officials effectively shape policy outcomes through discretionary practices.

Thus, the problem is not merely one of policy design but of governance capacity and accountability. Implementation gaps transform potentially transformative policies into uneven and contingent outcomes.

Urban–Rural Divide and the Geography of Inequality

The spatial dimension of inequality further complicates the landscape of gender and marginal politics. Urban areas, characterized by relatively better infrastructure, educational institutions, and employment opportunities, tend to provide more conducive environments for women's empowerment. In contrast, rural regions often remain constrained by limited institutional capacity and deeply embedded social norms.

NFHS-5 data indicate that women in urban areas have significantly higher literacy rates, greater access to digital technologies, and improved healthcare outcomes compared to their rural counterparts (IIPS & ICF, 2021). This divide is also evident in economic participation and access to formal employment opportunities.

However, rural spaces present a more complex picture. The institutionalization of reservations in Panchayat Raj has enabled women's entry into local governance, but their effectiveness is often constrained by lack of training, financial autonomy, and administrative support. Moreover, male out-migration from rural areas has

led to a feminization of responsibility without a corresponding redistribution of authority or property rights (Kabeer, 2016).

This suggests that the urban–rural divide is not merely a question of resource disparity but reflects qualitatively different experiences of empowerment. While urban women may experience greater autonomy, rural women often navigate a paradox of increased responsibility without proportional power.

Political Instrumentalization of Gender: Welfare and Vote-Bank Dynamics

One of the most significant challenges in contemporary Indian democracy is the instrumentalization of gender and marginal identities within electoral politics. Political parties increasingly target women and marginalized communities as distinct electoral constituencies, designing welfare schemes and campaign narratives to mobilize their support.

While such strategies have expanded the visibility of these groups, they also risk reducing empowerment to a transactional relationship between the state and citizens. Welfare schemes—such as cash transfers, subsidies, and targeted benefits—are often framed as benevolent provisions rather than rights-based entitlements. This personalization of welfare reinforces hierarchical relationships between political leaders and beneficiaries, limiting the development of autonomous political agency.

Electoral data show a consistent rise in women’s voter turnout, with women in several elections matching or exceeding male participation rates (Election Commission of India [ECI], 2019). However, increased participation does not necessarily imply independent political choice. Voting behaviour continues to be shaped by household dynamics, community affiliations, and targeted political messaging (Kumar, 2020).

Furthermore, the political construction of categories such as “women” or “the marginalized” often obscures internal heterogeneity. Differences of caste, class, religion, and region are frequently subsumed under broad identity categories, enabling political actors to claim inclusivity while avoiding deeper structural reforms.

Conclusion of the Section

The challenges outlined above reveal a fundamental paradox at the heart of gender and marginal politics in India: the simultaneous expansion of inclusion and persistence of structural inequality. Progressive policies and institutional mechanisms have undoubtedly created new opportunities for participation and visibility. However, their transformative potential is constrained by entrenched hierarchies, implementation deficits, spatial inequalities, and political instrumentalization.

As a result, the trajectory of change remains uneven and contested—marked by incremental gains alongside enduring exclusions. Recognizing this duality is essential for moving beyond simplistic narratives of success or failure and toward a more nuanced understanding of democratic transformation in India. The coexistence of empowerment and constraint underscores the need for deeper structural reforms that go beyond symbolic inclusion to address the underlying distribution of power.

Critical Analysis: Tokenism vs Transformation in Indian Gender and Marginal Politics

The preceding analysis demonstrates that gender and marginal politics in India cannot be meaningfully captured through a binary framework of success versus failure. Instead, a more analytically productive approach is to conceptualize tokenism and transformation as coexisting and mutually constitutive processes. This section advances a central argument: while many state interventions originate as symbolic, instrumental, or electorally motivated measures, they may—under specific socio-political conditions—evolve into sites of gradual and contingent transformation. At the same time, the limits of state-led empowerment remain profound and structurally embedded.

The Coexistence Model: Moving Beyond Binary Frameworks

The conventional dichotomy between tokenism and transformation obscures the layered and dynamic nature of democratic politics in India. Rather than operating as mutually exclusive categories, these processes often unfold simultaneously within the same institutional and policy frameworks.

For instance, the reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions was initially critiqued as a symbolic intervention that would reproduce existing power relations without substantive change. However, empirical evidence suggests that even where women entered politics through proxy or mediated arrangements, their presence gradually influenced governance priorities—particularly in sectors such as public health, education, and local infrastructure (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).

This indicates that descriptive representation can generate conditions for substantive representation over time. Tokenism, therefore, should not be interpreted solely as a failure of inclusion but as a potentially enabling mechanism that opens institutional spaces for future transformation. The coexistence model recognizes that democratic change is incremental, uneven, and deeply contingent on contextual factors.

From Tokenism to Transformation: Mechanisms of Gradual Change

A critical insight emerging from this analysis is that tokenistic interventions may acquire transformative potential through sustained engagement, institutional reinforcement, and social negotiation. This transition is neither automatic nor linear but occurs through identifiable mechanisms.

(a) Institutional Exposure and Capability Formation

Policies that incorporate marginalized individuals into formal institutions—such as political reservations or self-help groups—create opportunities for experiential learning and capacity building. Over time, participants develop administrative competence, political awareness, and networks of support.

Women representatives in local governance, for example, often begin with constrained autonomy but gradually assert greater control across successive electoral cycles. This aligns with Kabeer's (1999) conceptualization of empowerment as a process involving the expansion of resources, agency, and achievements. Institutional exposure thus functions as a catalyst for long-term capability formation.

(b) Normative Disruption and Social Visibility

Even symbolic inclusion can produce significant normative effects. The visibility of women and marginalized groups in public roles challenges entrenched assumptions about gender and caste hierarchies. NFHS-5 data (2019–21) indicate measurable improvements in women's education, mobility, and participation in household decision-making (IIPS & ICF, 2021).

Such shifts suggest that representation is not merely descriptive but performative: it reshapes societal expectations and redefines the boundaries of what is considered acceptable or possible. Over time, these changes contribute to a gradual reconfiguration of social norms.

(c) Political Incentives and Institutional Deepening

Electoral competition has incentivized political actors to expand welfare provisions targeting women and marginalized communities. While often dismissed as populist or vote-driven, these policies can lead to the institutionalization of entitlements.

Conditional cash transfers, for instance, may initially function as targeted benefits but can evolve into rights-based claims when beneficiaries mobilize collectively. This dynamic illustrates how instrumental political strategies can unintentionally contribute to democratic deepening by expanding state accountability and citizen expectations.

Structural Limits of State-Led Empowerment

Despite these transformative possibilities, the capacity of the state to produce substantive empowerment remains constrained by deeply embedded structural and institutional limitations.

(a) Social Embeddedness of Inequality

State interventions operate within pre-existing social hierarchies that they cannot easily dismantle.

Patriarchy and caste are not merely institutional arrangements but deeply internalized systems of power that shape behaviour, norms, and expectations. Consequently, formal inclusion often coexists with substantive exclusion.

Intersectional analysis underscores that marginalized women-particularly those from Dalit, Adivasi, and minority communities-experience compounded disadvantages that are insufficiently addressed by universal or category-based policies (Crenshaw, 1989; Deshpande, 2011).

(b) Bureaucratic Mediation and Elite Capture

The implementation of empowerment policies is mediated through bureaucratic structures that may reproduce existing inequalities. Local elites frequently capture resources, limiting access for the most marginalized groups. Additionally, the discretionary authority of frontline officials' shapes policy outcomes in uneven ways, as highlighted by Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy.

This institutional mediation raises critical questions about the redistributive efficacy of state interventions and their ability to reach intended beneficiaries.

(c) Dependency versus Autonomy

While welfare schemes provide immediate material benefits, they may also reinforce dependency on the state. When benefits are framed as discretionary or leader-driven, they risk perpetuating hierarchical relationships between citizens and political authority.

This dynamic complicates the concept of empowerment, as improvements in material conditions do not necessarily translate into autonomy, agency, or political independence.

(d) Political Instrumentalization and Short-Termism

State-led initiatives are often embedded within electoral strategies that prioritize short-term visibility over long-term structural change. Policies designed to secure electoral support may emphasize symbolic gains and rapid delivery rather than sustained institutional reform.

As a result, empowerment becomes contingent on political calculations, limiting its transformative scope and durability.

Rethinking Empowerment: Toward a Multi-Dimensional Framework

The analysis suggests the need to reconceptualize empowerment as a multi-dimensional and relational process that extends beyond state policy. While the state plays a critical role in enabling inclusion, meaningful transformation requires the interaction of multiple actors and processes.

Drawing on Iris Marion Young's (2000) framework of inclusive democracy and feminist theories of agency, empowerment must encompass not only representation but also the transformation of decision-making structures and social relations.

In the Indian context, this implies:

- Complementing state-led initiatives with grassroots mobilization and civil society engagement
- Addressing structural inequalities through institutional reform and redistributive policies
- Reframing welfare as a rights-based entitlement rather than a discretionary benefit
- Recognizing intersectionality as central to policy design and implementation

Such a multi-dimensional approach shifts the focus from inclusion as presence to empowerment as power.

Conclusion of the Section

In sum, the relationship between tokenism and transformation in Indian gender and marginal politics is best understood through a coexistence model. Tokenistic interventions, while limited in intent and scope, can create openings for gradual transformation through institutional exposure, normative change, and political contestation. However, these processes are inherently constrained by structural inequalities, bureaucratic mediation, and the limits of state-led approaches.

The trajectory of empowerment in India is therefore partial, negotiated, and contingent. Achieving substantive and sustained transformation requires moving beyond symbolic inclusion toward a deeper restructuring of social, political, and economic power relations. This remains the central challenge for the future of inclusive democracy in India.

Conclusion

This article has examined the complex relationship between tokenism and transformation in the context of gender and marginal politics within Indian democracy. Rather than treating these as mutually exclusive categories, the analysis has demonstrated that they coexist in dynamic and often contradictory ways. State-led initiatives aimed at inclusion-ranging from political representation to welfare policies and legal reforms-produce layered outcomes in which symbolic inclusion and substantive change intersect.

The findings suggest that Indian democracy generates hybrid results. On the one hand, there have been significant advances, including increased political participation of women, the expansion of targeted welfare schemes, and gradual shifts in social norms relating to education, mobility, and public voice. On the other hand, these achievements remain uneven and are frequently constrained by persistent structures of patriarchy, caste hierarchy, and socio-economic inequality. Consequently, many initiatives that appear transformative often retain elements of tokenism in both implementation and impact.

Importantly, the study highlights that tokenism is not always static. Under certain conditions, tokenistic measures can evolve into transformative processes. Policies such as political reservations and grassroots development programmes may initially function as symbolic inclusion, yet over time they can foster agency, awareness, and meaningful participation. This indicates that democratic transformation in India is gradual, negotiated, and inherently non-linear.

However, the limitations of state-led empowerment remain evident. Structural inequalities continue to shape access to power and resources, while bureaucratic constraints and implementation gaps dilute policy effectiveness. Additionally, the instrumental use of marginalized identities in electoral politics raises concerns about the depth and sustainability of empowerment.

In light of these challenges, two key directions emerge. First, deeper structural reforms are necessary to address entrenched inequalities rooted in caste, gender, and class. Second, strengthening grassroots agency through local leadership, collective mobilization, and genuine decision-making power is essential for meaningful inclusion.

In conclusion, the trajectory of gender and marginal politics in India reflects both the possibilities and constraints of democratic transformation. The coexistence of tokenism and substantive change underscores the evolving nature of democracy itself. The central challenge moving forward lies in deepening this transformation-shifting from symbolic inclusion to genuine empowerment-so that Indian democracy can more fully realize its promise of justice, equality, and participatory governance.

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