

Women and The Politics of Exclusion: The Gendered Cost of Democratic Backsliding in India

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Abstract

There are growing concerns about the erosion of India's democratic framework as we witness a weakening of public institutions, curtailment of civil liberties and increased centralization of political power. In a country plagued by deep-rooted and historical structural hierarchies of caste, class and gender, the disproportionate impact of this democratic backsliding is borne by marginalized groups. The essay examines how the weakening of democratic institutions disproportionately affects women, restricting their political participation and diminishing their rights and protections. It points to contemporary developments and recent data to demonstrate the gendered consequences of the erosion of democratic values through the exclusion of women from political spaces and their active repression by the State. The use of carceral laws and defunding of women's rights organisations, as well as crackdown on dissent are among the many ways in which the gendered consequences of democratic backsliding are manifesting in India. The paper argues that there is a need for gender-mainstreaming in conversations on reclaiming public spaces and institutions. It concludes by noting that fortifying democratic institutions cannot be a project undertaken in silos, but one that responds to structural discrimination that leaves women on the fringes of economic and political participation.

Keywords: Gender Justice, Women in Democracy, Democratic Erosion, Democratic Backsliding

1. Introduction

At its fundamental essence, democracy requires the equal participation and representation of all citizens. Consequently, gender equality is not merely a desirable outcome of a democratic society but a fundamental prerequisite for its proper functioning (Ruiz and Rubio-Marin, 2008). Democratic backsliding refers to the debilitation of public and political institutions essential for sustaining a democracy (Bermeo, 2016) and is characterised by “the dismantling of democratic norms and institutions by purposeful elite actors” (Carothers and Press, 2022). When democratic institutions weaken, the space for marginalised groups, including women, often diminishes. Conversely, persistent gender inequality can undermine the very foundations of democracy by excluding half of the population from full civic and political participation.

Globally, we are witnessing a rise in anti-gender politics signaling the amplification of patriarchal and heteronormative ideas that posit feminist politics and gains as a threat to traditional values (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). In the Indian context, this rise in anti-gender politics must be viewed in parallel with the rise in Hindu nationalism the tangible effects of which are evident in moves like legislative measures curtailing the citizenship rights of Muslim women, pushbacks against the rights of domestic and care workers who are primarily women, and the severe restrictions being imposed on foreign funding for organisations working on women's rights and gender equality causes (Chigateri and Kundu, 2024). The crisis of democracy we are currently confronting, therefore, cannot be decoupled from the socially embedded hierarchies of gender and caste (Mishali-Ram, 2025). Existing research points to the myriad ways in which women in India experience compounded discrimination because of intersectional

identities of caste and gender (Haq, 2013; Chander, 2019). This permeates every aspect of life, from access to education, denial of public spaces and the lack of economic autonomy. In a country rooted in deeply patriarchal values, the exclusion of women from the public space deeply undermines democratic values of equality and liberty, thereby amplifying gender inequality (Saikia & Baruah, 2012). In India, the world's largest democracy by virtue of the sheer numbers of its population and the volume of people engaging in democratic processes, the interplay between gender and recent trends of democratic backsliding warrants careful examination (Das, 2024).

This paper, therefore, examines the causal link between deteriorating democratic values and institutions in India and heightened gender inequality by engaging with recent literature, data and news reportage documenting the declining markers of gender equality in India. Primary sources, including scholarly work on democratic backsliding, gender equality and women's political participation in India, were analysed alongside news reports and global studies on gender equality and data reports published by reputed organisations tracking democracy and gender equality indicators to examine how the preservation of democratic values and institutions is the bedrock of advancing gender equality and in the absence of the former, the disproportionate adverse impact is first witnessed in the rollback of historical gains made by women's rights groups and movements. Using the terms democracy and gender equality, democratic backsliding and gendered impact, and women's political participation in India, sources were identified from Google Scholar to define and frame the normative questions posed by this paper. These were then supplemented with news reports and data reports, as well as secondary online sources, including blogs and opinion pieces, to substantiate the arguments and claims made in the paper. Evidence in the form of case studies and examples that showcase the visible impact of the erosion on democratic values on the lives of women in India allowed for a clear identification of the gendered cost of democratic backsliding in India over the last decade. The focus on the period beginning in 2014 was made given the change in the political party and governance ideology with the coming into power of the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) at the federal level.

Taking note of the growing concerns and criticism of the incumbent government's failure to uphold constitutional values and abide by the principles of democratic governance, this paper emphasizes how some of the most significant failures of public institutions have been in protecting and addressing the socio-economic rights and status of women in India, who are being pushed further to the margins of public life and denied equal citizenship by an increasingly authoritarian regime.

2. The Erosion of Democratic Politics: The Recent Indian Experience

Both successes and challenges have characterised the Indian experience of democratic politics. The 1950s and 1960s were an era when the emphasis was placed on ensuring that intersectional and representative politics remained the fundamental pillars of the state. During these decades, consistent efforts were made to ensure political participation from diverse groups across caste, class, religion, and gender, with a particular focus on accounting for the voices of marginalised communities (Devenish, 2021). This period was followed by a decade that has come to be known as a dark period in the democratic history of India, marked by the imposition of a 21-month-long Emergency from 1975 to 1977 during the tenure of Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister. During this period, there was a profound erosion of the democratic fabric of the nation, characterised by crackdowns on opposition leaders, the suppression of dissent, and blatant assaults on the independence of the judiciary (Sarna, 2021). Many observers contend that there is a resurgence of authoritarian tendencies reminiscent of the emergency era, particularly in the current political climate of India, with the General Elections of 2024 serving as a pivotal juncture (Rajagopal, 2019; Khaitan, 2020; Sundar, 2020; Singh, 2023).

When the BJP-led government was elected to power in 2014, with Narendra Modi as the Prime Ministerial candidate, its primary objective was to restore India to its former glory. The era was to be characterised by economic prosperity, enhanced governance, and improved quality of life, commonly referred to as "Ache Din" (the Hindi phrase translating to good days in English) (Swaminathan, 2015). Despite the progress made in recent years, the past decade has seen a gradual yet concerning trend of democratic regression, as described by numerous scholars and international organisations (Tudor, 2023; Ganguly et al., 2024; Das, 2024). This erosion manifests in the gradual weakening of democratic institutions, including the judiciary, the electoral commission, and the media (Bhatia, 2024). This

regression is characterised by the centralization of power and the increasing concentration of authority within the executive branch, often at the expense of the legislature and judiciary. The weakening of institutions and the erosion of the autonomy and effectiveness of independent institutions, such as the election commission, media, and civil society organisations, have led to the suppression of dissent and the crackdown on freedom of expression. Governments have targeted critics, journalists, and activists, resulting in a climate of fear and intimidation. This deterioration is sometimes described as an "electoral autocracy," where elections occur but political space for opposition, civil society, and dissenting voices is severely limited (BBC News, 2021). This democratic regression has consequences beyond political contestation; it deeply influences social governance frameworks, including policies aimed at gender equality. When democratic institutions falter, mechanisms to secure rights for marginalized groups, including women, weaken correspondingly (Roggeband and Krizsán, 2020). In India, this phenomenon of democratic backsliding has intersected with gender issues, exposing intricate challenges and implications for women's rights and representation (Mishali-Ram, 2025). Increased political violence, harassment, and intimidation disproportionately affect women candidates and activists, discouraging their participation in politics.

3. Democratic Backsliding and Gender Inequality in India

The correlation between democratic decline and gender inequality is multifaceted and mutually reinforcing. Democratic institutions are not mere political structures but also instruments that uphold rights, representation, and social justice. They are at risk when they weaken. Consequently, vulnerable groups, particularly women, disproportionately face adverse consequences. The two significant manifestations of this can be seen in recent trends in women's political participation and in the State's crackdown on women activists and organisations that have been critical of the government.

3.1 Women's Exclusion from Political Life

The principle of Universal Adult Suffrage, giving all citizens the right to vote, regardless of their gender, religion, literacy or economic standing, embodies the cornerstone of individual rights. This foundational concept is deeply ingrained in the Constitution of India, guaranteeing every adult citizen the right to vote, irrespective of their caste, class, religion, or gender. It serves as the linchpin upon which the concept of governance is realized and forms the bedrock for democratic rule and the fundamental right to vote. Historically, women in India have been systematically excluded from public and political domains, including the democratic process (Chhibber, 2002). Pioneers such as Sarojini Naidu and Begum Roquiah Sakhawat Hossain spearheaded the struggle for women's suffrage and paved the way for their political representation in the newly established Independent India (Doctor, 2018). With the adoption of the Universal Adult Franchise, the Constitution was intended to establish the foundation of a democratic system that would both represent and respond to the socio-economic and cultural diversity of its citizens. Despite significant progress in gender equality and representation over the past several decades, women continue to encounter systemic barriers that impede their full participation in the democratic process. For instance, despite their increased participation in the electoral process, women continue to remain underrepresented in public and political institutions (Kapoor and Ravi, 2014). In the general elections held in 2024, women's voter turnout was 65.8% surpassing male voter turnout (65.6%), but only 74 of the 543 seats (13.6%) in the 18th Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Indian parliament, were won by women candidates, revealing the shockingly low numbers of women legislators in India (Association for Democratic Reforms, 2024; Election Commission of India, 2024). Globally, women on average represent 27.2% of parliamentary seat holders (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025). When contrasted with these statistics, the Indian scenario paints a dismal picture, failing to meet this benchmark by even 50%. This is even more shocking given that the Women's Reservation Act was passed in 2023, mandating that 33% of the seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies be reserved for women (Kapur, 2023).

These statistics must be analysed in the larger socio-political context we currently see in India, where a rise in anti-gender politics and conservative politics is leading to tokenistic legislative measures that do little to undo structural discrimination faced by women. A study conducted in 2019 (Yadav, 2023) documented survey responses

from 165 politicians across major national parties and relevant state-level parties to examine whether the backsliding currently being witnessed in post-2013 India is the culmination of a longer process of democratic erosion rather than the outcome of the BJP's anti-democratic politics. Notably, Yadav's research reveals that BJP politicians expressed significantly weaker support for key liberal democratic values compared to non-BJP politicians. For instance, only 75.5% of BJP respondents viewed "equal gender rights" as essential to democracy, whereas 88% of non-BJP respondents did. Additionally, BJP politicians more often favoured legislative supervision of courts over full judicial autonomy (Yadav, 2023). Yadav also documented declining institutional quality. The share of MPs with criminal charges increased from 24% in 2004 to 43% in 2019. Parliamentary sessions and oversight mechanisms such as short notice questions and half-hour discussions have sharply declined in number, and the executive increasingly deploys state agencies to harass critics, civil society, and journalists.

These elite attitudes and practices matter deeply for gendered exclusion because when elites deprioritize gender equality, women lose more than symbolic representation. In fact, they lose institutional levers to contest discrimination, demand fairness, and ensure accountability for rights violations. Democratic backsliding thus deepens the structural dispossession of women, not simply as voters, but as political actors and equal citizens (Yadav, 2023). Here, it is also pertinent to note that India ranked 108 of 193 countries on the global Gender Equality Index 2025 and 131st out of 148 nations in the 2025 Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum, with a gender parity score of only 64.1%. This places India near the bottom globally and highlights persistent disparities, including low female literacy (65.46% vs. 82.14% for males), high female labour force underrepresentation (about 41.7%), and widespread gender-based violence (UNDP, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2025).

3.2 Erosion of Civil Liberties and State Violence Against Women

While violence against women and restrictions on feminist activism are longstanding issues in India, the period since 2014 marks a decisive shift towards more severe and systematic repression by the state. Historically, gender-based violence in India has been intertwined with deeply rooted patriarchal, caste, and communal hierarchies which marginalized women and restricted their agency (Rao, 2003; Uberoi, 2006). The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data reveal a consistent increase in reported crimes against women, rising from 428,278 cases in 2021 to 445,256 in 2022. Most crimes involved domestic violence, kidnapping, abduction, and sexual assault (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2025). However, these figures mask a far greater reality of underreported violence, rooted in deep social stigma and distrust of legal institutions (Singh, 2024). Rural women remain disproportionately affected by domestic and dowry-related violence, while urban women encounter growing risks of sexual harassment and cybercrimes (Bhatia, 2024). Marginalized groups such as Dalit and minority women bear the compounded brunt of violence and judicial neglect, as demonstrated by extremely low conviction rates and frequent police indifference (Bhatia, 2024; Singh, 2024). Institutional responses have been inadequate. Although government schemes and legal provisions exist, implementation gaps, lack of trained personnel, and social biases undermine their effectiveness. Budget allocations for victim support and crisis centers have been underutilized, further weakening protection mechanisms (Alliance Magazine, 2025). This systemic failure not only perpetuates violence but signals a broader state abdication of responsibility toward women's safety.

Another critical tool for curbing feminist activism has been the tightening of regulations on foreign funding and contributions towards civil society organizations in India. The heightened scrutiny and mass revocation of approvals under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, 2010 (FCRA) since 2014 represent a significant structural constraint on feminist organizations and women's movements in India (Singh, 2024). This law regulates foreign funding for NGOs. Its amendments have severely restricted financial inflows essential for advocacy, legal aid, and grassroots activism. According to a 2025 report by Alliance Magazine, over 6,600 NGOs lost their FCRA registration from 2017 to 2021. Many of these NGOs are focused on feminist causes (Alliance Magazine, 2025). Feminist NGOs report persistent regulatory harassment, including frequent audits, fund seizures, and accusations of violating opaque compliance norms. These pressures have resulted in downsizing staff, curtailing programs on domestic violence and reproductive rights, and dissuading new membership due to fear of reprisals (Singh, 2024). This defunding crisis has

eroded the vital ecosystem of support that enables women to access justice, health care, and empowerment opportunities. It represents a coordinated strategy to weaken civil society's role in gender equality.

The law has also become a weapon of political repression and violence by the State against women, as evidenced by the use of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1967 (UAPA) as a tool of political repression (Singh, 2024). Natasha Narwal and Devangana Kalita, of the women's collective Pinjra Tod, were arrested in May 2020 and charged under UAPA. Both were imprisoned in Tihar Jail as under-trial prisoners, facing multiple charges linked to protests the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the Delhi riots in 2019-2020. The two women were incarcerated for over two years of incarceration in harsh conditions while facing multiple UAPA charges despite human rights groups contesting the lack of credible evidence (Womens Media Center, 2021; The Swaddle, 2023). Similarly, Gulfisha Fatima's detention under UAPA for her role in the Northeast Delhi protests underscores the broader pattern of disproportionately targeting Muslim and minority women activists (People's Union for Civil Liberties, 2025). These cases highlight the gendered dimensions of state violence. From extended pre-trial detention and harassment to social stigmatization, these practices discourage political participation by women, particularly from marginalized backgrounds (Singh, 2024). The chilling impact on civil society discourages collective action and silences critical voices advocating for democracy and equity.

4. Discussion

Democratic backsliding frequently coincides with a backlash against women's rights and gender equality. This backlash can manifest in the weakening of legal frameworks and the dilution or non-implementation of laws that protect women from violence, discrimination, and harmful practices. Increased social conservatism and the rise of majoritarian ideologies can be accompanied by a push for socially conservative norms that restrict women's autonomy and freedoms. In this environment of heightened scrutiny, attacks on civil society organisations further limit their ability to advocate for gender equality. The rise of certain narratives and policies in India has been criticized for potentially reinforcing patriarchal structures and undermining women's agency.

The General Elections of 2024 serve as a stark illustration of the persistent erosion of democratic institutions, which has disproportionately affected women's political participation. During the 2024 Elections, women, particularly those belonging to minority groups, encountered disenfranchisement (Karmakar, 2024). A notable case in point is Ayesha Kidwai, a professor of linguistics at Jawaharlal Nehru University and a vocal critic of the BJP. Kidwai discovered that her name had been removed from the electoral rolls. Despite the efforts of booth-level officers to address these deletions simultaneously, it was alleged that her name was erased due to her identity as a 'Muslim woman' (Karmakar, 2024). In another instance, activist and cinematographer Simantini Dhuru discovered that her name was removed from the voter list while attempting to cast a vote in support of democracy. Officers claimed that her name was removed due to a report of her death, but she was never informed by the Electoral Registration Officer (Karmakar, 2024). Renowned lawyer Vrinda Grover took to social media to express her concerns regarding the electoral process, highlighting the disenfranchisement experienced by her mother, Pushpa Grover, who was denied the right to vote. An 89-year-old woman, who believed this could be her final opportunity to vote, expressed a strong desire to "vote out hate," but was arbitrarily denied the opportunity to do so (Karmakar, 2024). These incidents underscore the escalating threat to the Constitution, exacerbated by the heightened paranoia during elections and the decline of democratic principles.

Exclusion from the democratic process is one of the numerous methods by which women's dissenting voices have been silenced under the current regime. Renowned Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy has expressed her discontent with the erosion of democratic principles and has subsequently been prosecuted under the stringent Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). Where Roy has been labelled anti-national for her critique of the incumbent government, others have had dire consequences (Sen, 2024). In 2017, Indian Journalist Gauri Lankesh was silenced by murder at her residence in Bangalore at the age of 55. On the day she was killed, Lankesh had posted a message on the social media platform Facebook, where she was critical of the Indian government's deportation of Rohingya Refugees (Khalid, 2017). The passing of Gauri Lankesh brought to light the decline of press freedom in

India and resonated deeply with members of the civil society, who have since expressed their concerns about the erosion of the fourth pillar of democracy under the leadership of the BJP-led central government (Taseer, 2019).

Since 2014, India's historical trajectory on gender justice and civil liberties has taken a stark turn for the worse. Rising gender-based violence, institutional neglect, financial strangulation of feminist NGOs, the expansive use of repressive laws like the UAPA, and aggressive policing of women's protests collectively signal a turning point towards increased state repression (Kundu and Sridhar, 2025). The data and case studies presented above elucidate the detrimental impact of India's democratic regression on gender equality. This regression reinforces traditional patriarchal structures and impedes women's empowerment across various political, economic, and social domains. The country's poor performance in global gender gap rankings further highlights these systemic challenges. Therefore, strengthening democracy by upholding pluralism, civil liberties, and inclusive governance is paramount to advancing the rights and status of women. Gender equality transcends its role as a democratic ideal; it constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for the sustainable health of India's democratic system.

Addressing this dual challenge necessitates the simultaneous strengthening of democratic institutions and the advancement of gender equality. There is an urgent need to enhance legal protection for women and strengthen the enforcement of laws safeguarding women from violence and discrimination. Further, active measures must be taken to facilitate women's meaningful political participation through the effective implementation of reservation policies and the provision of support to women leaders. Inclusive governance is crucial, ensuring that the voices and perspectives of women and other marginalised groups are central to policymaking and governance. The future of India's democracy is intrinsically linked to the advancement of gender equality. Safeguarding the principles of freedom of speech, assembly, and the press is thus paramount for facilitating effective advocacy and activism on gender-related matters.

5. Conclusion

The convergence of democratic regression and gender concerns in India highlights the intricate challenges confronting the nation's democratic trajectory. The erosion of democratic values and institutions, particularly since 2014, has led to a rollback of women's rights and increased gender inequality with the use of repressive laws like the UAPA against women activists, disenfranchisement during elections, and the silencing of dissenting voices. The deterioration of democratic institutions and civil liberties not only compromises the overall vitality of democracy but also impedes the full and equitable participation of women in the democratic process. Women remain underrepresented in political institutions, with only 13.6% of Lok Sabha seats held by women. This underrepresentation is compounded by a rise in anti-gender politics, leading to tokenistic legislative measures and a decline in institutional quality, further marginalizing women as political actors.

To address this challenge, a comprehensive approach is necessary that simultaneously combats democratic decay and gender inequality. This entails strengthening democratic institutions and ensuring the independence and effectiveness of the judiciary, the election commission, the media, and civil society organisations. Additionally, it involves promoting women's political empowerment by effectively implementing the Women's Reservation Bill and addressing the systemic barriers that hinder women's participation at all levels. Furthermore, protecting and advancing women's rights involves enforcing existing laws, enacting new legislation to address gender-based violence and discrimination, and challenging socially conservative norms.

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