The decade of 1990s marked the dawn of new era with respect to participatory democracy. India had a new beginning in strengthening the hands of women and making them an integral part in the decision making process system. The word empowerment means strengthening the hands of weaker section of society which could be achieved through decentralisation of authority and power and making women active agents in the change making process. Political empowerment aims to mainstream the deprived section of society by giving them their say in political participation and thus in turn giving voice to the voiceless. Women empowerment may connote providing women with same status as that of men and the opportunity and freedom to develop herself. It enables women to be economically self-dependent, reliant and have a positive self-esteem. The key meaning of political empowerment in Indian context is ‘power’ which is ‘access to power’, ‘power to control’ and ‘power to make informed choices’. The degree of participation of women in participatory democracy depends on their ability to participate, their willingness to get involved in change making process and opportunities available to them in governance structure. The concept of political participation of women gave rise to the concept of women empowerment which is not a new concept basically. It has started to come in picture now from oblivion.

Women empowerment in India is based on three fundamental themes which are non-negotiable and incontrovertible: (1).The equality between men and women. 2. Their right to develop their potentials. 3. Their right to self-determination and self-representation. The first ever world conference on women was held in Mexico in 1975 to address the issue of gender equality. It was followed by second world conference on women at Denmark's capital Copenhagen in 1980 and third conference was held at Kenyan capital Nairobi in 1985. According to the Jakarta declaration, 'empowerment of women is not only equity consideration, it is also necessary precondition for sustainable economic and social development. Involvement of women in the political arena and decision making roles is an important tool for empowerment as well as monitoring standards of political governance'.

In India the institution of local self-government which is popularly called Panchayatsnow days is one of the most important edifice for empowering women politically. It traces a long history since Rippon's resolution of 1881 and 1882 although, its democratic form is of recent origin. The history of political empowerment has been roller-coaster and topsy-turvy ride in Indian history since purdah system of medieval system to 33% seats being reserved for women. The concern for equal participation for women emerged for the first time during Indian national movement where they participated shoulder to shoulder with men. In 1917 they made a demand for universal adult franchise and by 1929 they had the right to vote based on wifehood, property and education. Then came the Government of India act, 1935 which endowed all the women above 21 years with the right to vote provided they fulfilled certain conditions with respect to property and education. Post independence, it was only after setting up of committee on the status of women in India in
1971 that the demand for effective political participation could be taken in a more effective way. Then came the biggest milestone in the history of political participation and political empowerment of women in India in the form of 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments to the Indian constitution in 1992 and 1993 which explicitly provided 33% reservation to women.

During freedom movement, Indian women leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Pandita Rama Bai became the beacon of dedication and sacrifice towards nation and fought shoulder to shoulder against British. After independence the position of women gained the much needed vigour and sustenance with Indira Gandhi becoming the first prime minister and Pratibha Devi Singh Patil becoming the first president. India was one of the few countries to give voting right to women ever since the first general election unlike many other democracies. The government of India had declared the year 2001 as the year of empowerment for women.

Exercising voting rights during election is one of the most important political activities of the people. It is an important step in the ladder of political empowerment of women. Political participation is not just casting vote for them. It includes wider range of other activities like membership of political party, campaigning in the election, attending party meetings, demonstrations, communication with leaders, holding party positions, contesting elections, membership in representative bodies, influencing decision making and other activities related to election. Today India can actually vaunt that there are more elected women in this country than the rest of the world put together. According to the ministry of Panchayati Raj's mid term appraisal of the state of Panchayats 2006-2007, there are about 10 lakh women in our Panchayati Raj Institutions constituting about 37% of all those elected. Also there are about 80,000 female Pradhans. The last 20 years of Panchayati Raj era in Indian democracy have witnessed women going from strength to strength in terms of their political participation. Of the 30 lakh elected Panchayat representatives, approximately 12 lakh are estimated to be women. The average of women representation in Panchayats across the country is 39.64%. However, a few states have gone beyond mandated 33% and have provided more reservation to women. For example Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand have reserved 50 % seats for women and Sikkim has reserved 40% seats for women. The 110*constitutional amendment bill 2009 stipulates for providing reservation to women from 33% to 50% in Panchayati Raj institutions. The bill seeks to amend article 243D to increase the limit of reservation of women from one-third to one-half of the total seats in the Panchayats. Same reservation shall be provided among the total number of offices of chairpersons.

Data mustered from various state level and general election since 1952 shows that though the Indian democracy is representative as far as the participation of women in electoral process is concerned but the picture is bleak when their presence in executive and legislature is taken note of. The representation of women in Lok Sabha has been inadequate with average percentage of women Members of Parliament being 6.91 % while average number of women Members of Parliament being 36.8. The total number of female legislators in 1952 i.e. first general election was merely 22(4.41%) which increased to merely 62 i.e. 11.23% of total strength of Lok Sabha which highlights the bleak side of the picture. The presence of women in the council of states has been only slightly higher overall, partly due to indirect election and partly due to nomination of some women members. It was highest in 1990 at 15.5% and then kept on declining ever since. The number of elected women Members of Parliament in Lok Sabha never exceeded 12% and in Rajya Sabha, it never came closer to 33%.In 1952, there were merely 16 women Members of Parliament out of 216 seats in Rajya Sabha which constituted 11.83% of total strength. The number of women contesting election has been always low, it was merely 636 in 2014 which reflects the sorry state of affairs but it is interesting to note that percentage of winners among women has consistently been rising in comparison to men. For example in 1996 only 3.8% of male candidates won, in comparison to 6.7 % of male candidates. Similarly, the percentage of winners was 11.2% for men about 15.7% for women in 1998, 6.44% and 10.61% in 2009 and 6.39% and 9.74% respectively in 2014(16th Lok Sabha). Similar scheme of things more or less also prevails at the state level. The source reveals that the highest percentage of women in state legislative assemblies had been 10.8% in 1957 in Madhya Pradesh. Since independence we had so far 15 women chief ministers and 23 women governors. Only one woman till now had served as president of India and so far we could not have any woman as vice president and chief justice of India. Only one woman has got the opportunity to serve as chief election commissioner and one chairperson as Union Public Service Commission but none as Comptroller and Auditor General.

Women's empowerment has to be multifaceted and multidirectional. The contribution of women in the society should be visible. The society must be able to recognise the inherent talent, capabilities and skills of women. Women should have access and control over means of production.
Political participation is an indispensable tool for political empowerment. Political participation of women can be measured on three scales namely participation as voter, their participation as an elected representative and their participation in actual decision making process. Their participation as voter and their participation as elected representative are being measured by election commission since first general election. Generally at the local level there is high representation of women because of the reservation of seats for women, however there are genuine concerns which are being raised at times that it is the men who have been ruling actually by using women as their proxy. Many factors are responsible for the sorry state of affairs. History of Indian national movement corroborates the point that large number of women participated in it but it kept on dwindling after the independence. Gender roles attributed by the society towards women have become major obstacles in women’s true political empowerment. Traditional division of work, illiteracy, economic barriers, the type of electoral system etc. have kept women away from politics. Apart from this, contesting elections also are very costly. Women are not able to afford large amount of money which is required to fight elections. Centralized power structure and corruption have been the major issues which put fetters in the feet of women. The gender biases of political parties are roadblocks for women gaining decision making powers. Women find it difficult to establish strong foothold in politics without party base. Women bolstered by family and husbands are recognised by the parties. Veteran women politicians are bypassed. No serious efforts are made to mobilize women as political group.

The measurement of women political participation is essential in devising policy intervention to improve it. As the legislation provided for reservation of 33% of seats for women, the number of women elected representatives at the local level has increased since. However measuring political participation of women in India is also not relatively easy because of plethora of reasons. At times they act merely as the proxy of their husbands. Though quantitative data regarding their effective political participation in decision making process can be measured easily but qualitative data on their decision making acumen cannot be gauged easily. There can be various strategies which could be incorporated to devise a robust framework for effective measurement of women’s political participation in India.

The govt. can effectively use the analytics to authenticate, segregate as well as cluster data groupwise with respect to women participation in local self government. Sophisticated technology like video mining, text mining and mobile telephony can be used to retrieve the meaningful information from the mammoth data. Work has already been started by the current dispensation to use social media analytics for grassroots development and gender issues. However everything is not as easy as it seems. There are large numbers of psycho social barriers in full realisation of political empowerment of women. In this male dominated chauvinistic society, acceptability of women elected representatives is an issue. At times they are merely the proxy for their husbands. The AC Nielsen ORG-MARG survey showed that about 87% of elected women representatives had contested only once and only 14% had been re-elected. Giving elected women representatives at least 10 years of continued working opportunity by extending the rotational term of reserved seats can provide them the much needed political space to manoeuvre. Adequate spread of the rights and duties of elected women representatives should take place and also elected women representatives of different states should be encouraged to form associations or groups so as to strengthen political empowerment. Post independence number of articles in the constitution like article 14, 15, 16 explicitly prohibited discrimination. Article 39A guarantees right to an adequate means of livelihood for all citizens. Article 39B guarantees equal pay for equal work for both men and women. The 73rd constitutional amendment has incorporated sufficient provisions for the empowerment of women in Panchayati Raj institution. Article 243D (3) extends reservation to elected offices as well. The office of chairpersons in Panchayats or any other level shall be reserved for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and women in such a manner as legislature of a state may by law provide. Article 325 and Article 326 guarantees political equality, equal right to participate in political activity and right to vote.

There have been number of instructions issued to all states and union territories to protect the elected women representatives for instance it should be the duty of state and the union territory to ensure the safety of elected women representatives and ensure that they don’t merely act as the proxy of their husbands. The states and union territories have been firmly told to instruct all Panchayati Raj Institution in their area to hold the meeting of mahila sabha before holding the meeting of Panchayat. In the quorum of gram sabha, at least half of the voters should be women. States which don’t have such provision should have it as soon as possible. Panchayati Raj Institutions should be involved in integrated plan of action so as to fulfil other responsibilities like preventing human trafficking, displacement because of land acquisition etc. To speak the gist of the current status of women empowerment, we can safely reach to the conclusion that India still has got miles to go and make a mark in empowering women politically. About 82% women are
educated in the country while women's education is merely 65% which again proves to be an impediment in full-fledged political empowerment of women as they lack the exposure required. The 108th constitutional amendment bill popularly known as women reservation bill which stipulates 33% of seats to be reserved for women in Loksabha and in all state legislative assemblies could not gain enough consensus to sail through. Had it been passed then it would have been historic milestone in empowering women politically and abysmally low number of female legislators in state legislative assemblies and Loksabha would have been thing of past. 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment act also suffers from many issues in empowering women politically. There are deep seated social barriers and patriarchal mindset ubiquitous in Indian societies which are major hindrances in political empowerment of women. Encouraging women for self-employment and motivating them to be part of self-help groups can go a long way in empowering women. Changes can be made in women's mobility and labour pattern for their good. In book 'A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia' Bina Agarwal has put forth the gender gap in ownership and control of property being the most important reason which affects the woman well being and her empowerment. There is also the lack of access to gainful employment. These issues need to be addressed immediately. The government needs to be more proactive in emulating the international models of successful political empowerment and the politicians need to rise from their regional and selfish interests and support any step undertaken for women empowerment wholeheartedly.

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