

A TICKET TO RISE

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Elections, Election Commission and the Electoral Reforms in India Incl. Political Parties

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Women account for 49 per cent of India's 90 crore voters; the turnout of women voters has risen sharply over the years, and was the highest ever in the last Lok Sabha elections (at 65.5 per cent). But India's representative democracy has defiantly refused to accord political equality to women — less than 12 per cent of its Lok Sabha legislators are women. Odisha Chief Minister and BJD chief Naveen Patnaik's decision to field 33 per cent women in 21 seats in the coming general elections is, therefore, a landmark move — one which must be embraced heartily by the political mainstream.

Patnaik pointed out that he was walking the path laid out by his father, the late Biju Patnaik, who was among the first votaries of 33 per cent reservation for women in panchayats. That idea travelled well, and the reservation was raised to 50 per cent of seats in several states. There were naysayers aplenty — with the commonly-held patronising belief that women would only serve as proxy candidates for male relatives. But the panchayati raj experience shows otherwise — more women have taken up leadership roles at the micro-level, despite obvious barriers, such as the (recently-scrapped) minimum education criterion to contest the polls in Rajasthan. That has created a critical mass of politically engaged women which is, perhaps, reflected in voting turnouts and in assertive demands — for instance, the push for prohibition in several states. But what after? The roadmap from panchayat to assembly and Parliament was never laid out — parties dodge the question with excuses such as winnability of candidates, while a closed political system remains most pliant to money power, family connections and, sometimes, simply the XY chromosome. The UPA government introduced the Women's Reservation Bill in 2008 — and then shut the door on it. In this backdrop, the BJD has shown a way out of chronic tokenism over women's political participation — if passing a bill to reserve seats for women is too much hard work in these polarised times, each party must push more women candidates into the fray.

Over the years, one of the successes of Indian democracy has been the way it has expanded to accommodate and articulate various interests — the upper-caste veto on politics, for instance, has been seriously challenged. But this push towards inclusivity has comprehensively excluded women, with whom political parties rarely even hold a conversation. True, there is no monolithic category of Indian woman, who is shaped by her caste, language and class location. But that diversity of political ambitions and needs — even the contestations over it — must be reflected in the making of policy and laws, and in assemblies and Parliament. Even the existing system has thrown up strong leaders such as [Mamata Banerjee](#), [Mayawati](#), J [Jayalalithaa](#), among others, who stuck on at great personal cost to themselves. But a new generation of Indian women is ready to embrace their ambitions. It is time for political parties to open their doors.

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