Review Article

POPULISM, PERCEPTION, AND POLICY: WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN POLITICAL PARTY MANIFESTOS

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Abstract

Election Manifesto is generally considered as a published declaration which exhibits the intentions of the political parties to meet the aspirations and expectations of the voters. Our paper engages with manifestos as a populist tool in the broader canvas of electoral campaining. Campaigns emphasise on image building, creating narratives and persuading the citizens to introduce discourses around "the elite" and "the people". In the recent decade, one such discourse is being created around women. As women voters have become a critical demographic, political parties have increasingly centered them in their manifestos through symbolic representation and image-building of the "Nari".

This paper critically assesses women's representation both "inside" and "outside" manifestos, moving beyond superficial narrative constructions to evaluate substantive policy inclusion. Through a detailed content analysis of the manifestos of three political parties, the study identifies areas where women's issues are addressed

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and highlights significant gaps where women still remain marginalized.

Keywords

Election manifesto, women, populism, policies, political parties

Introduction

Elections in India are often seen as a festival rather than merely a war of words or ideological contestations. On the day of voting, people feel special and empowered as the most important actors on the political stage of the country. They engage with the state, considering it their moral responsibility, which in turn reinforces their political consciousness. Soon after Independence, the world keenly observed the general elections, which were considered "the biggest gamble" that would determine the political course of the Indian subcontinent. Today, the Election Commission of India (ECI) proudly claims to have successfully conducted both general and state elections in the largest democracy in the world. Campaigns are a big part of this unique festival and play a significant role in this electoral process. Satirists, playwrights, and cartoonists have often depicted in their artworks the cacophony caused by election campaigns.

With the advent of digital media, elections are no longer unstructured and spontaneous events decided by a few top politicians from their respective parties. In today's media-saturated world, perceptions about leaders and policies are shaped by popular culture and mass media (Mazzoleni, 2007). Each political party is not only managed by a hierarchy of politicians based on their political experience but also by a separate, often invisible entity known as public relations (PR) personnel. PR acts to create public opinion, shape dialogue and discourse, and promise a form of democratic representation and agency (Cronin, 2018). Each aspect of the campaign is influenced by this entity, with manifestos being the most visible and concrete component. As a result of these symbols, images, and slogans have become central to electoral populism. Initially, only major political parties released their manifestos, but now every state and national party publishes a comprehensive document outlining ideological beliefs, social policies, and economic strategies.

One specific area that has recently gained attention is the focus on women's issues in party manifestos. Over the past decade, it has been observed that party manifestos have increasingly prioritized policies and programs related to women. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, women outnumbered men in voter turnout in nearly 19 of the 36 states and Union Territories (Jain, 2024). This increase in women's electoral participation has been lauded as a significant step towards greater inclusion in the democratic process. While this trend indicates a positive shift in women's engagement in electoral politics, it remains an anomaly when juxtaposed with other socio-economic indicators (Kumar, 2024). Despite their increased political participation, women continue to lag behind men in several critical developmental parameters, such as labour force participation and access to public healthcare. These disparities highlight the limitations of electoral participation as a sole indicator of women's empowerment. For a transformative impact on gender equality, it is essential to address the structural barriers that hinder women's full participation and representation in all spheres. Therefore, the current political enthusiasm around women's increased voter turnout needs to be critically examined against the backdrop of broader challenges that continue to impede gender equity.

Despite our concentrated effort, this paper focuses only on three political parties and analyzes their recent policies concerning women. There was a notable lack of party manifestos from state-level elections available in the digital domain. In this study, we conduct a broad analysis by examining some key policies impacting women in India. However, there is an intricate interplay of factors such as caste, culture, and socioeconomic status. These intersecting parameters indeed complicate the landscape, necessitating a more nuanced approach to understanding the underlying issues. However, our primary question remains- Has manifesto as a tool in populist electoral set up, which today is heavily invested in data and scientific research, genuinely carved out a space for women?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and analytical approach to examine the representation, inclusion, and marginalisation of women in political party manifestos. The study draws on secondary data review and content analysis of manifestos from the three political parties that secured the highest seat share in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections: the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, 240), the Indian National Congress (INC, 99), and the Samajwadi Party (SP, 37).

The qualitative analysis includes a review of existing reports on the status of women in India to situate the broader socio-political context. This analysis provides an understanding of the challenges women face both outside and inside political structures, offering a background against which the party manifestos are evaluated. Reports from government sources, NGOs, and academic literature were reviewed to capture trends in women's health, education, and employment, which were also the key parameters addressed in the manifestos across political parties.

Thorough content analysis is done to classify the manifestos of the BJP, INC, and SP, focusing on women's inclusion, to assess the frequency and nature of women-centric policies, the language, and framing of women's issues. This analysis highlights patterns of inclusion and marginalisation of women across the political spectrum.

Finally, the findings from both the analyses are synthesised to provide a holistic understanding of the place of women in contemporary Indian political party manifestos and broader political discourse.

Literature review—Electoral Populism and Women

Manifestos are neither a new innovation in political studies nor a neglected tool in the sphere of electoral politics. However, it is an essentially understudied concept as a benchmark to assess accountability and transparency in policy formulation and implementation. The Election Commission of India's Model Code of Conduct (2019) defines a manifesto as 'a published document containing a declaration of the ideology, intentions, views, policies, and programmes of a political party,' allowing political parties to articulate their vision for the country or the state, presenting their

ideological stance on various issues. They outline the policies, reforms, and priorities the party intends to pursue if elected to power, providing voters with a clear understanding of the party's agenda. It offers insights into how each party identifies and addresses key issues in the arena of the economy, healthcare, education, national security, and social welfare. With the increasing importance of electoral campaigning in a spirited democracy, rigorous multilateral campaigning ranging from traditional media to social media platforms (Rovny, 2012), manifestos reckon with dynamic political landscape, changing voter expectation, and the growing complexity of governance.

In the words of Laver and Garry (2000), manifestos are 'strategic documents written by politically sophisticated party elites with many different objectives in mind'. Scholars have delineated functions of manifestos as a compilation of valid party positions, streamlining the campaign (Eder et al., 2017), rhetoric and communication and ex post pledge fulfilment (Muhammad, 2020). As the manifesto paves way for electoral mobilisation, it capitalises upon popular perceptions and constructs appealing narratives, giving an impression of being reflective of the aspirations of the people. Arguably manifestos are drafted by conducting surveys, consultations, and feedback sessions with various stakeholders, including party workers, civil society, identifying the pulse of the people.

It can be seen as a political strategy that focuses on the direct appeal to "the people" while denouncing "the elite." This aligns with the broader definitions of populism by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), who describe populism as a "thin-centred ideology" that separates society into two opposing groups: the pure people and the corrupt elite and argues that politics should be the expression of the *Volonte generale* (general will) of the people.

Indiscriminate offering of freebies such as, free laptops and cell phones, waivers to farm loans, reimbursement on educational loans are a common sight across party manifestos. Therefore, in the Indian context, populism is often associated with the 'indiscriminate use of public resources to give goods away to voters' (Chakrabarti & Bandyopadhyay, 2020). As a form of crowd appeasement politics, the immediate electoral gains are called out

against fiscal and policy imperatives in the long run (Decker, 2003), thereby having an inherently negative connotation.

Populist manifestos, while generally focused on the binary division between "the people" and "the elite," often embody deeply gendered expectations, which can significantly impact women's experiences. These manifestos typically appeal to a universal notion of "the people," but this assumed universality overlooks the distinct experiences and needs of women and other marginalised groups (Kantola and Lombardo, 2019). The gendered nature of populist politics is evident in how these manifestos address (or fail to address) issues related to gender inequality. While populism and feminism both conceptualise society in terms of dominant and subordinated groups, feminism highlights the dominance of men over women, calling attention to patriarchal structures (Kantola and Lombardo, 2019).

Therefore, while populist manifestos might appeal broadly to "the people," they often fail to engage with the complexities of gender inequality, thereby limiting their effectiveness in addressing the specific challenges faced by women. This can result in policies that, while popular among the general electorate, do not necessarily advance gender equality or address the unique experiences of women in society.

Women outside manifestos—Trends over the years

The concept of *Nari Shakti* has gained significant prominence in India, becoming a central theme in populist narratives that celebrate the strength and resilience of women. However, to move beyond symbolism and achieve meaningful progress, it is essential to conduct a comprehensive analysis revealing both the strides and challenges across various sectors that impact women's lives.

As per the All India Survey of Higher Education report (AISHE, 2022), Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) has increased to 28.5 in 2021-22 from 22.9 in 2014-15. The report further exhibited that female PhD enrolment has doubled in the last decade. However, despite this improved enrolment, digital marginalisation of women has remained an essential issue that needs to be addressed. Say, for instance, Smartphones have penetrated swiftly into the hinterland in India, but most girls did not own the devices and

used one that belonged to other members in their family (Annual Status of Education Report [ASER, 2023]). During the ASER survey, in rural districts close to 90 percent of the 14-18 age group reported having a smartphone at home and more than 90 percent reported being able to use such a device portraying ample access to digital devices. Disparity however, was observed between the girls and boys when their digital knowledge was examined critically. Only 25 percent of girls as opposed to 50 percent of boys were able to use Google Maps to track a nearby bus stand.

Apart from access to digital literacy, distance of educational institutions and transportation facilities remain another key factor especially in rural areas to determine women's education and her employment opportunities. Survey in Sitapur highlights that after class 10th, parents were unwilling to send their daughters to school because of the considerable distance and did not want to risk their safety while travelling (ASER, 2023). State of Working Report (SWR, 2023), also highlighted the importance of transport infrastructure in determining the number of women working outside the home. For 11-20kms women's dependence on public transport increases to 62 percent, whereas for me it is 40 percent. As per the Population census (2011) data, there is an interstate difference in women's travel pattern. States like Kerala, Maharashtra had nearly 60 percent employed women travelling more than 1.5 km to work as compared to states like Bihar and UP which is only 30 percent.

In terms of health, there has been some improvement in nutritional status, with stunting among children under 5 reducing from 38.4 percent to 35.5 percent (National Family Health Survey-5 [NFHS-5], 2022). Poshan Abhiyaan (2018) has led to a more integrated approach to tackling malnutrition, with increased community engagement and awareness. However, the same data shows that while there have been improvements, malnutrition, and anaemia among women remain persistent challenges. The burden of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and cancers (especially breast and cervical cancer) has also increased among females. The prevalence of NCDs among women is 62 per 1,000, as compared to 36 per 1,000 men (Sharma, et al., 2020).

Other than nutrition, NFHS-5 reports a rise in institutional births to 88.6 percent and a decline in maternal mortality from 167 (2011-13) to 97 (2018-20) per 100,000 live births as per the NITI Aayog's health index (2021). This can be accredited to the Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK) under the National Health Mission, which provides for free delivery and postnatal care services to pregnant women (PIB, 2020). In this, Anganwadi workers (AWWs) have played a crucial role by increasing the uptake of maternal health services, and increasing awareness about antenatal care and institutional deliveries. Their regular interactions with pregnant women help in early identification of health risks, contributing to the reduction of maternal mortality rates. However, they continue to be recognised as volunteers and not employees (Madan, 2020). Consequently, in several states, these essential-care workers do not receive fixed monthly incomes and social security benefits, making it impossible to account for their economic contribution in the calculation of India's GDP. According to the Press Information Bureau (PIB) "the Government has enhanced the honorarium of AWWs at main - AWCs from Rs. 3,000/- to Rs. 4,500/- per month and AWWs at mini-AWCs from Rs. 2,250/- to Rs. 3,500/- per month, also introduced performance linked incentive of Rs. 250/- per month for AWHs and Rs. 500/- to AWWs" (PIB,2024).
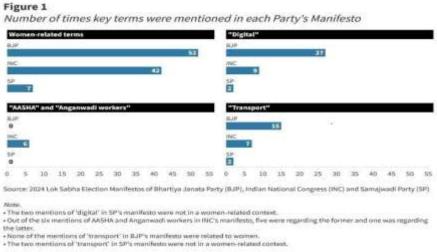
In case of overall female labour force participation as per the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, 2022), around 32.8 percent female of working age (25 years and above) were in the labour force in 2021-22 which was just 23.3 percent in 2017-18. SWR (2023) further expands this data, which noticed an unusual increase in female work force participation during the pandemic. The report noted this peculiar trend with rising employment of women during pandemic (60 percent) to be labelled under the self-employed category. There is a crowding-in of women in the self-employment sector as compared to casual or salaried workspace. One segment of this category includes Self Help Groups. Out of the Total SHG Bank linkage Programme, more than 80 percent of them belong exclusively to women (NABARD,2023). Other than SHGs, as per the PLFS (2022) data, self-employment has two

categories—those who are account workers or employers and those who are helpers in household enterprises. The latter type is basically unpaid work undertaken in one's own economic activities, and this has actually shown an increase. The unusual increment in female labour participation is just a distress led participation, especially in rural areas with a seasonal employment of employment based on a decreased household income (SWR, 2023, p.49).

Over here, we have done a broad study by taking some key policies impacting women in India. The focus of this section was to identify critical policy challenges that warrant our attention in the coming years. This brings us back to our original question as to how a populistic election manifesto falls low to address or make promises around this policy paralysis.

Women 'Inside' Manifestos—a Comprehensive Analysis

In the lead-up to the 2024 elections, India's major political parties have unveiled ambitious manifestos promising sweeping changes in digital education, transportation, healthcare, and employment. This section analyses the manifestos of the political parties within the populistic realm of engaging the women voters.

Figure 1
Number of times key terms were mentioned in each Party's Manifesto

Source: 2024 Lok Sabha Election Manifestos of Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), Indian National Congress (INC) and Samajwadi Party (SP)

Note.
• The two mentions of 'digital' in SP's manifesto were not in a women-related context.
• Out of the six mentions of AASHA and Anganwadi workers in INC's manifesto, five were regarding the former and one was regarding the latter.
• None of the mentions of 'transport' in BJP's manifesto were related to women.
• The two mentions of 'transport' in SP's manifesto were not in a women-related context.

Education and Digital Divide

The manifesto of BJP, 'Modi ki Guarantee 2024', promises promotion of digital education. The 'Nyay Patra', manifesto of INC

on the other hand, assured to provide access to digital equipment like mobile phones to school students of classes IX to XII along with free and unlimited Internet on college and school campuses to increase accessibility and connectivity for students. SP's 'Janta ka Maang Patra', on the lines of INC, promises to provide free laptops to youth, making easier accessibility of digital devices. For internet accessibility, SP has mapped Aata-Data scheme, under which, every ration card-holder family will be given 500 rupees worth of free data to bridge the digital divide. In terms of education, in order to ensure equal enrolment ratio, the manifesto by SP, promised free girl child education named 'kg to pg free education'.

It is evident that political parties often make ambitious claims, such as providing free education or free internet access, without thoroughly analysing past data and existing reports. The school enrolment ratio has already improved significantly. Moreover, they have focussed on increasing the accessibility of digital devices and internet access, in terms of mobile phones, laptops and free data. However, according to a press release by Press Information Bureau (PIB) as of December 2022, the tele-density of India reached 84.67 percent. The data available, thereby, portrays wide availability of digital gadgets and internet accessibility to the people of India.
However, manifestos remain silent about digital marginalisation and dropout ratio of women after 10th standard. Girls with lower levels of functional literacy often cannot make optimum use of smartphones.
Manifestos don't address the increasing non-traditional threats against women. According to the NCRB data of 2022, published in 2023, the number of cyber-crime cases registered have risen from 50035 in 2020 to 65893 in 2022. Women have become more vulnerable to cyber-crimes, due to lack of digital literacy being available to them (ASER rural survey). A staggering 5780 incidences of women centric cyber-crimes were registered in 2022. The constant rise in cyber-crimes, with a staggering digital divide, highlights the need to focus on lack of accessibility to digital

education and opportunities, rather than providing freebies in terms of digital devices and internet.

Transport and communication-

The BJP manifesto mentions improving transportation of the country by creating unified transport system, by integrating multi-modal transport facilities, to ensure ease of mobility of both passengers and cargo through waterways, railways, and roadways. The Samajwadi party has targeted the improvement of quality of roads, by assuring to ensure pothole free roads for enhancing road safety. The INC on the other hand has emphasised upon improving the residence facility for women, ensuring that they do not have to travel long distances for education or employment. INC aimed to establish one Government Community College in every tehsil/taluk for students completing Class XII. These community colleges will offer a broad range of degrees/diplomas suitable for jobs in the service industry (e.g. hospitality, tourism, digital marketing, paramedical, paralegal, etc.) and for jobs in the manufacturing industry that require basic technical skill. Establishing sufficient night shelters for migrant women workers and doubling the number of working women hostels in the country, with at least one Savitribai Phule Hostel in each district, the INC envisioned. Our analysis shows that transport and safety in public spaces is requisite to women's empowerment. However, only INC's manifesto has sparingly made a reference to it.

Health and Nutrition-

In terms of health of women specifically, the manifesto of Samajwadi Party, Janata ka Maangpatra, HumaraAdhikaar, remains silent. The promises made although had a passing mention of better healthcare facilities to be provided under social and economic rights, women's health was totally absent from the manifesto. The Nyay Patra (INC Manifesto) intended to rapidly reduce the incidence of stunting and wasting to address malnutrition by expanding the mid-day meal scheme up to Class XII. Anaemia prevails among the majority of both pregnant and non-pregnant Indian women, according to the NFHS-5 report (PIB, 2022). Despite the need for specific attention towards women's

health, the party manifesto of INC has considered health as a generic sector where improvement is required.Whereas Modi ki Guarantee 2024 has mentioned no strategy or program to be adopted regarding their aim to reduce anaemia, breast cancer, cervical cancer, and osteoporosis, and to launch campaigns to eliminate cervical cancer. With respect to maternal health INC promises that maternity benefits will be available to all women, and that all employers will be required to grant paid maternity leave to their employees. The BJP manifesto highlights its achievement of increasing paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks, making no further claims

Anganwadi and ASHA-

Only the INC manifesto mentions frontline workers such as ASHAs and AWWs.The Nyay Patra mentions that the contribution of the Central government to frontline health workers (such as ASHAs, AWWs, Mid-Day Meal cooks, etc.) will be doubled. To reduce the burden of work, the INC manifesto has promised to appoint a second ASHA in villages with a population of over 2,500. Additionally, the manifesto of INC aims to double the number of AWWs and create an additional 14 lakh jobs.

These workers play multiple roles, from pre- and postnatal maternal health care to early childhood education, which require full-time responsibility. Despite their significant contributions, they are still considered volunteers and do not receive adequate social benefits. They have been demanding formal recognition, but none of the manifestos have provided a comprehensive plan to formalize the care sector in the country.

Employment

In India, more than 50 percent Self Help Groups are owned by females. Manifestos have also declared SHG to be the quintessential key to women empowerment. For strengthening SHGs, INC aimed to substantially increase the amount of institutional credit that is extended to women. In particular, enhancing the credit extended to Self Help Groups by banks, NBFCs and Micro Finance Institutions ensuring that banks offer low-interest loans to SHGs.

BJP envisioned moving beyond 1 crore, *Lakhpati didi* to 3 crore lakhpati didis. Empowering SHG in service sector like - IT, healthcare, education, retail, and tourism and enhancing market access for SHGs through initiatives like *one district one product*, FPO, Ekta mall, ONDC, GEM forms a core strategy for empowering SHG in BJP's manifesto.

The concept of 'women's empowerment' has often been reduced to poverty alleviation strategies like forming Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and promoting microcredit entrepreneurship only (Batliwala, 2007). Our above analysis already suggested that improvement of female labour force participation is lopsided.

A significant proportion of women are either self-employed or engaged in the agricultural sector—both of which often serve as fallback options during times of household income decline. Employment opportunities for women continue to be heavily influenced by gender norms, societal expectations, and family dynamics. However, manifestos have not addressed these specific concerns.

The above-mentioned Party Manifestos exhibit all the characteristics of being a populistic tool. Promises which mostly include freebies for instance, a monthly pension of 3000 rupees to women below poverty line (SP manifesto) are not based on scientific analysis. A specific budget, or a timeline for completion of the proposed targets, is also not mentioned. All the manifestos have mentioned schemes or financial assistance which are not financially viable. There seems to be constant competition among parties to outdo each other's imprudent bids.

Conclusion

The focus of a populist manifesto on a generalised "people" can lead to the marginalisation of women's specific needs and concerns. Populist promises may propagate traditional gender roles, reinforcing stereotypes that place women in subordinated positions. Moreover, the policies proposed may not adequately address issues like gender-based violence, economic inequality, or reproductive rights, as these issues do not always align with the populist narrative of the people vs. the elite.

Populism in India, while often seen as a threat to democracy, can also serve as a powerful tool for democratic engagement, particularly by mobilizing marginalized groups, including women. As argued by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), populism's potential as an emancipatory force, lies in its ability to challenge the limitations of liberal democracy.

However, populist political practices carry a paradoxical risk: while it democratizes power by engaging the public, it can simultaneously erode democratic processes by fostering short-term, emotion-driven politics (Chakrabarti & Bandyopadhyay, 2020). Manifestos frequently exhibit the same paradoxes. While they try to capture attention by focusing on the needs of the masses, the promises they make are often short-term in nature, designed primarily to win elections rather than foster long-term governance and development. This reliance on immediate, emotion-driven appeal can lead to irresponsible fiscal practices, as manifestos often include promises that are fiscally unsustainable or politically expedient but lack a well-thought-out, long-term vision. Hence, the need for seeking accountability becomes imperative, wherein the manifesto not merely remains a tool for pre-election vote mobilisation but also forms the basis for informed decision-making.

The experiences of party manifestos demonstrate that, despite their inclusionary rhetoric, these parties often reproduce informal patriarchal institutions that marginalize women's concerns. To ensure democratic electoral processes are a force for gender equality in India, political parties must move beyond symbolic representation and address the structural barriers that limit substantive representation and participation of women. Party manifestos should commit to gender parity in leadership, transparent decision-making, and the inclusion of feminist perspectives. Only by genuinely engaging with feminist politics can manifestos transform into vehicles for a more inclusive and egalitarian democracy, ensuring that women are empowered as leaders and decision-makers.

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