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VOTES WITHOUT VOICE: PATRIARCHAL MEDIATION OF
RURAL WOMEN'S ELECTORAL CHOICES IN INDIA

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Patriarchy,
Rural Women,
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Gender.

Abstract

The fundamental principle of democracy depends on citizens exercising their voting rights as equal and free individuals. Rural India exists as a site where the democratic voting rights of citizens encounter substantial challenges to become a reality. The voting process for rural Indian women becomes subject to household and community oversight instead of personal belief because patriarchal authority restricts their electoral choices. The research investigates how patriarchal structures affect the voting decisions of rural Indian women. The analysis examines how kinship ties and caste systems, and class positions work together to restrict women's political decision-making power, through secondary data from the Census of India and Election Commission reports and CSDS survey findings. The research demonstrates that Indian democracy faces a fundamental contradiction because women participate in elections in increasing numbers but still lack the freedom to make their own voting choices. The analysis demonstrates through statistical data and visual representations that women participate in high numbers at the polls, yet they face ongoing restrictions in their voting independence. The elimination of patriarchal control over voting ballots stands pivotal for attaining both gender equality and authentic democratic practices in India.



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1. INTRODUCTION

India's democratic achievements are often measured by the scale of its elections, which are among the largest across the globe. In contemporary years, one striking trend has been the intensifying engagement of women in the electoral dynamics in India. According to Election Commission of India¹, women's turnout has risen consistently, and in several state contests since 2010, their participation rates have surpassed those of men. These developments are frequently hailed as evidence of women's empowerment and the consolidation of democracy. However, a closer look at rural India unsettles this celebratory picture. The rising numbers conceal the reality that many women's votes continue to be shaped, and at times dictated, by patriarchal authority. In such settings, the ballot is less an expression of independent choice and more an extension of the household or community will.

Patriarchy in countryside India is not a residual tradition but a deeply entrenched system that shapes everyday life, socially, economically, and politically. As Kandiyoti² and Jeffery and Jeffery³ note, women's autonomy in South Asia has for decades been constrained by household hierarchies and kinship arrangements. Within the electoral sphere, this often produces what feminist researchers describe as "proxy participation"⁴, where women appear at polling booths in large numbers but vote according to the preferences of their husbands, fathers, or village elders. This contradiction between impressive participation figures and limited autonomy raises important questions about the substantive quality of democracy in India. While the Constitution enshrines universal adult franchise, patriarchal structures dilute its practice by subordinating women's political participation. In rural settings, where caste, class, and kinship intersect, voting often reinforces collective hierarchies rather than reflecting personal conviction. Thus, women remain symbolic participants, visible in turnout figures but absent in decision-making power.

This problem is not confined to voting alone. Reforms such as the 73rd Constitutional Amendment of 1992, which reserved one-third of panchayat seats for women, were expected to transform local governance in India. However, a wide range of studies exhibit that many women representatives function as proxies for their male relatives, a phenomenon widely known as the sarpanch pati syndrome^{5 6}. The same dynamic extends to general elections: women's presence at polling stations signals participation, but patriarchal authority often continues to shape the electoral outcomes.

To understand the nature of rural women's electoral behaviour, we must move beyond headline statistics and examine the social dynamics that influence their political choices. This article examines the household pressures, kinship obligations, and community expectations that channel women's votes. In doing so, it questions the adequacy of turnout as a measure of empowerment and argues for a more substantive understanding of women's political agency in India.

The discussion unfolds in an integrative manner, synthesizing theoretical observations with empirical evidence. It first reviews the literature on patriarchy and political behaviour, situating rural women's experiences within the broader debates on gender and democracy. It then turns to



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voting patterns in rural India, using secondary data to illustrate how patriarchal norms continue to shape decisions at the ballot boxes. This article analyzes the mechanisms of patriarchal control, ranging from household authority to caste-based enforcement, and their implications for democratic representation. The conclusion reflects on what these trajectories mean for the times ahead of India's democracy, where women's ballots remain, in many cases, constrained.

2. PATRIARCHY AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR

Any discussion of rural women's voting behaviour in India must begin with an understanding of patriarchy and its effect on political agencies. At its core, patriarchy can be articulated as a system of male dominance institutionalized across social, economic, cultural, and political domains⁷. It operates through both visible and invisible mechanisms: through overt coercion on the one hand and through normalized customs and expectations on the other. In political life, this implies that women's opportunities for participation, and the extent of their autonomy in exercising democratic rights, are often circumscribed by gendered hierarchies.

Political scientists and feminist intellectuals have asserted that voting is rarely an isolated, individual act; it is embedded in webs of social relations. In rural India, these relationships are powerfully shaped by patriarchal authority. Kandiyoti's² influential idea of the "patriarchal bargain" explains how women accommodate themselves within restrictive systems by accepting male control in exchange for protection or social legitimacy. Translated into the sphere of voting, this signifies that women may comply with household or community expectations, not necessarily due to their lack of awareness or preference, but because challenging those norms can incur social penalties.

Empirical studies have reinforced this theoretical insight. Ethnographic research by Jeffery and Jeffery³ in Uttar Pradesh, for instance, noted that many rural women perceive voting as a duty tied to household honour. Casting a vote that contradicted male instructions could invite stigma and weaken their standing within kinship networks. Data sourced from the Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) align with this finding: in its 2019 post-poll survey, a large share of rural women reported consulting male relatives before making electoral decisions⁸. Such patterns complicate the liberal assumption that all voters enter the voting booth as free and equal citizens.

Patriarchal influence is also manifest in the phenomenon often portrayed as "proxy politics." Numerous studies on local governance document cases where women elected to panchayats serve as nominal representatives, while their husbands or male kin wield the real power, popularly referred to as the sarpanch pati syndrome⁶. While this practice is most visible at the level of elected office, its logic extends to the electorate at large: just as female representatives can be proxies for male relatives, so too do many rural women cast votes as proxies for household preferences.

Control over political information is another channel through which patriarchy shapes electoral behaviour. Research demonstrates that men prevail access to newspapers, television, and, increasingly, smartphones in rural households⁹. Women's exposure to political campaigns is



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therefore filtered through the male interpretation. In addition, women's physical mobility is restricted, which often limits their participation in campaign meetings or public rallies. Together, these constraints create an information gap that reinforces women's reliance on male relatives for political cues to vote. Iris Marion Young's¹⁰ concept of "structural domination" is particularly relevant. Patriarchy in agrarian India does not always manifest as direct coercion; it frequently works through entrenched norms that make male authority appear natural and unquestionable. Consequently, even in the gap of explicit commands, many women internalize the expectation that their votes should align with household or community preferences.

This framework helps explain a central puzzle: why rising turnout among women has not necessarily led to greater political empowerment in the region. As Chhibber¹¹ argued, equating numerical presence with political agency risks masking the structural limitations within which choices are made. While statistics denote that rural women participate in elections in unprecedented numbers, qualitative research makes it clear that many of these ballots are effectively cast under patriarchal supervision.

Seen in this light, the issue is not about individual behaviour alone but about systemic arrangements of the society. Patriarchy permeates households, kinship structures, and community governance in rural India, shaping electoral participation at multiple levels. Recognizing this systemic nature is essential if we are to shift beyond celebratory narratives of rising turnout and instead grapple with the substantive question of women's autonomy in India's democracy.

3. RURAL INDIA AND WOMEN'S VOTING

Rural India presents a paradox in the story of women's political participation in India. On the one hand, women's turnout has increased steadily over the earlier three decades and, in many state elections, has even exceeded that of men. However, this growing numerical presence has not always converted into greater freedom in decision-making. The disparity between inclusion in numbers and autonomy in choice points to the persistence of patriarchal control.

Official records confirm this increase in participation. According to the Election Commission of India¹, women's turnout during the 2019 Lok Sabha polls was 67.2%, slightly above the male turnout of 67.0%. This milestone was celebrated as evidence of the narrowing of gender gaps in Indian democracy. However, when one looks below the surface, disaggregated data reveal that rural women, the larger segment of India's female electorate, often cast ballots under strong patriarchal influence.

Table 1: Voter Turnout in Lok Sabha Elections, by Gender (2009–2019)

Election Year	Male Turnout (%)	Female Turnout (%)	Gap (F-M)
2009	60.2	55.8	-4.4
2014	67.1	65.5	-1.6
2019	67	67.2	0.2



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*Source: Election Commission of India (2022)¹.

At first inspection, these figures indicate that Indian democracy has achieved a new level of gender parity. However, survey data reveal a more sobering reality. The CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey (2019) noted that more than half of rural women (52%) admitted that their votes were aligned with instructions from their husbands or family members, while only 36% reported making their choices independently. In contrast, 78% of men claimed to have voted according to their own preferences. These findings highlight that a higher turnout does not inevitably imply a greater agency.

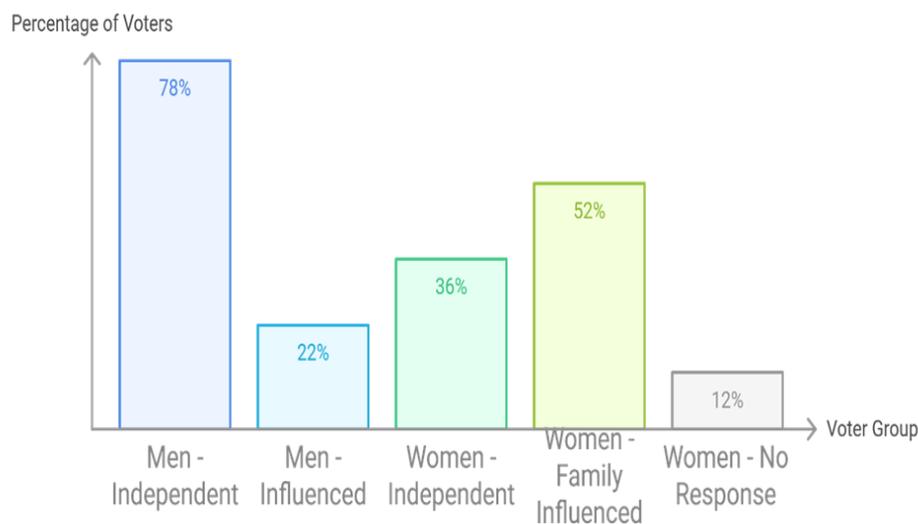


Figure 1: Decision-Making in Voting, Rural India (2019)

*Source: CSDS-Lokniti Post-Poll Survey, 2019⁸.

These data underscore the limits of interpreting turnout as empowerment. In reality, many rural women's votes are exercised within the boundaries of patriarchal control. Household authority, kinship networks, and caste hierarchies shape voting patterns in ways that dilute women's ability to act as autonomous citizens in the following ways.

This problem is not confined to elections alone; it reflects broader gender relations in rural households. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2020–21) offers a revealing picture: only 37% of rural women reported having the final say in major household purchases, and only 29% had a say in decisions about visiting relatives or friends¹². While not directly electoral, these figures offer context for understanding the limited decision-making power rural women exercise at the polls. If women's autonomy within the household remains constrained, it is unsurprising that their political opinions are mediated by male authority.

Thus, while turnout data exhibit that women have closed the numerical gap with men, the substantive quality of their participation remains uneven. The real challenge lies not in women's physical presence at polling booths but in ensuring their genuine freedom to decide how to cast

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their votes. In rural India, women may be present as voters, but their agency in shaping electoral outcomes is often absent.

4. MECHANISMS OF PATRIARCHAL CONTROL

The persistence of patriarchal dominance in rural India is revealed through several mechanisms that directly limit women's electoral freedom. These mechanisms operate at different levels of social life, within the household, across kinship and caste networks, and through community enforcement, ensuring that women's votes often align with male or collective preferences rather than individual convictions.

At the household level, male authorities play the most visible role. Husbands, fathers, or elder male relatives frequently instruct women on how to vote, framing compliance as a part of familial duty or loyalty. This influence can extend from persuasive advice to explicit orders, leaving women with little room to dissent. In many villages, collective voting practices further consolidate this control: families or kinship groups vote as a bloc to signal unity, and women are expected to follow the same.

Patriarchal mediation also works through controlling political information. Access to newspapers, television, and smartphones remains uneven, with men disproportionately monopolizing these resources⁹. Consequently, rural women often receive filtered political knowledge interpreted through male perspectives. Restrictions on mobility, such as norms discouraging women from attending rallies or public meetings, compound this gap, reinforcing their dependence on male household members for political cues.

These patterns become more explicit when viewed regionally. The CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey provides evidence of state-level variation in women's reported voting independence in India.

Table 2: Women's Reported Independence in Voting, Selected States (2019 Lok Sabha Elections)

State	% Women Voting Independently	% Women Voting as per Family Decision
Bihar	28%	62%
Uttar Pradesh	31%	58%
Rajasthan	34%	55%
West Bengal	41%	49%
Kerala	52%	38%
Tamil Nadu	48%	42%

*Source: CSDS-Lokniti Post-Poll Survey, 2019⁸.

These data highlight a striking pattern. States in northern India, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, record the lowest levels of independent voting among women, whereas southern states, for



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instance Kerala and Tamil Nadu, demonstrate higher levels of autonomy. This variation reflects the interrelation between patriarchal kinship systems, education, and social reform traditions across regions. In areas where patriarchal norms are more rigid and women's mobility is more restricted; household authority weighs heavily on electoral behaviour patterns.

Community enforcement further amplifies these dynamics. In many constituencies, village elders and caste leaders encourage block voting to consolidate their political influence. Women are often expected to align with such collective decisions, thereby reinforcing the patriarchal order. Together, these mechanisms show that women's ballots in rural India are rarely neutral expressions of individual preferences. Instead, they are mediated by overlapping layers of household authority, community enforcement, and structural inequalities, which converge to sustain patriarchal control over democratic participation.

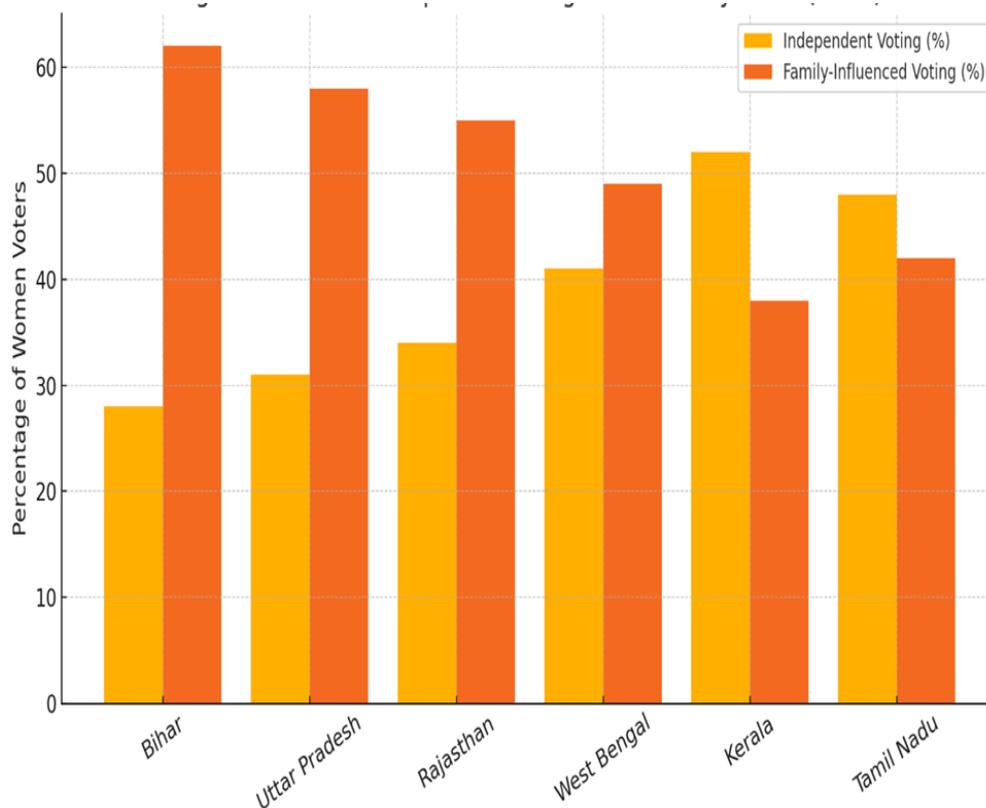


Figure 2: Women's Reported Voting Behaviour by State (2019)

*Source: CSDS-Lokniti Post-Poll Survey, 2019⁸.

5. REGIONAL PATTERNS AND PATRIARCHAL MEDIATION

The state-level differences shown in Figure 2 offer critical observations into how patriarchy interacts with regional social structures to shape women's electoral choices. The data reveal that northern states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan have the lowest levels of independent voting among women (28–34 %). In contrast, southern states, for instance Kerala and Tamil Nadu,



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report substantially higher levels of autonomy, ranging from 48% to 52%. These figures point to a broader north–south divide in gender relations and kinship systems, which, in turn, shape women's political behaviour.

In northern India, kinship practices are often marked by rigid patriarchal control. Patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal residence patterns, combined with lower female literacy and workforce participation, leave women with limited bargaining power in both household and political life¹³. Electoral choices in these regions frequently mirror family or caste imperatives, as women are mobilized to safeguard the collective interests. The expectation that women comply with household or caste instructions regarding voting has become so normalized that individual deviations are rarely tolerated.

In contrast, South India has historically fostered somewhat more egalitarian gender relations in specific domains. Kerala, with its long history of social reform and high levels of female literacy, provides women with greater leverage in household negotiations¹⁵. Meanwhile, Tamil Nadu has seen decades of populist politics and mass mobilization, which have expanded political awareness among women¹⁶. These conditions contribute to comparatively higher levels of independent voting in southern states, although patriarchal constraints are by no means absent.

Caste dynamics further complicate this picture. In the Hindi heartland, dominant castes often enforce collective voting patterns, ensuring that families or entire caste groups align with their agreed-upon political choices. Women are integral to this strategy because their votes strengthen the group's bargaining power. Among marginalized castes, patriarchal authority is reinforced not only inside households but also through external pressure from dominant groups, creating layered forms of electoral constraints¹⁷. In contrast, states similar to Kerala and Tamil Nadu, though not free of caste divisions, have witnessed stronger reformist traditions that somewhat mitigate patriarchal control over women's suffrage.

The divide illustrated in Figure 2, therefore, is not a simple statistical anomaly but a reflection of long-standing socio-cultural cleavages. This shows that the patriarchal mediation of women's electoral behaviour is not uniform across India but varies according to regional histories, caste configurations, and gender relations. Thus, women's autonomy at the ballot box is inseparable from the broader structural contexts in which they live.

6. CONSEQUENCES FOR DEMOCRACY

The regional and caste-based variations outlined above have far-reaching implications for the Indian democracy. At its core, patriarchal control undermines the principle of universal adult franchise by eroding women's autonomy in exercising their vote. Legally, women possess equal suffrage rights, but the substantive realization of these rights remains uneven. Rising female turnout, though often celebrated, represents a numerical gain without a corresponding increase in women's agency.

Patriarchal mediation distorts electoral representation. Political parties, recognizing that many women's choices are shaped by household authority, often design campaigns that target families or



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communities rather than women as independent political actors. This reduces women to extensions of patriarchal households, reinforcing their dependency instead of recognizing them as autonomous citizens.

The persistence of proxy voting provides another example. Whether in the form of the sarpanch-pati phenomenon at the village level or household-directed ballots in national elections, such practices reveal the gap between the formal promise of democracy and its substantive practice. India is often praised for its high voter turnout; however, these numbers mask the deeply gendered constraints on women's political agency.

The tension between turnout and autonomy becomes clearer when viewed through national data. Although women's participation during the 2019 Lok Sabha polls was high, their independence in decision-making remained limited.

Table 3: Women's Turnout vs. Reported Autonomy in Voting (2019 Lok Sabha Elections)

Indicator	Percentage	Source
Female voter turnout (national)	67.2%	Election Commission of India, 2022
Women reporting independent voting choice.	36%	CSDS-
Women reporting family-influenced voting.	52%	CSDS-
Women reporting no role in the decision.	12%	CSDS-

The contrast is striking: while two-thirds of eligible women voted in 2019, only about one-third did so independently. More than half admitted that their decisions reflected family influence, while another 12% reported having no role in the decision-making process. This autonomy deficit makes it clear that patriarchal mediation continues to dilute the meaning of women's political participation.

The consequences extend beyond the individual disenfranchisement. When large numbers of women vote under family or community direction, the aggregation of electoral outcomes reflects patriarchal preferences more than a gender-inclusive democratic will. Governments that appear to command broad-based female support may, in practice, benefit from votes shaped by patriarchal control.

Political parties have adapted to this reality in ways that reinforce this problem. Rather than directly engaging women as independent citizens, many parties channel their outreach through male household heads, confident that women's votes will follow. Although exceptions exist, such



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as state-level welfare schemes aimed specifically at women, these are often implemented within a framework that still assumes patriarchal gatekeeping over votes.

Such dynamics raise fundamental questions with respect to the depth and quality of Indian democracy. If women's agency in voting remains constrained, the constitutional principle of "one person, one vote" is compromised in practice. The persistence of patriarchal control demonstrates that Indian democracy cannot be assessed by participation rates alone. Without addressing the autonomy gap, claims of democratic deepening are incomplete.

➤ **Broad Patterns in Data: National and State-Level Evidence**

A national and state-level overview provides further clarity on how patriarchy shapes rural women's involvement in elections. While the Election Commission highlights the steady rise in female turnout, survey evidence reveals that this numerical inclusion conceals a persistent autonomy gap between men and women. The patterns become particularly clear when women's political behaviour is viewed alongside social indicators such as literacy and workforce participation.

States with greater female literacy rates and greater integration of women towards the workforce tend to show stronger independent voting. Conversely, in states where women remain largely outside the educational and economic spheres, patriarchal control over voting persists more strongly. This correlation underscores that electoral autonomy is not merely a political issue but is deeply tied to the broader structures of inequality.

Table 4: Female Literacy, Workforce Participation, and Independent Voting (Selected States, 2019)

State	Female Literacy (%)	Female Workforce Participation (%)	Independent Voting (%)
Bihar	61.8	9.1	28
Uttar Pradesh	63.4	11	31
Rajasthan	65.5	17.5	34
West Bengal	71.1	22.8	41
Kerala	92.1	32.4	52
Tamil Nadu	80.3	28.9	48



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*Sources: Census of India, 2011¹⁸; Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)19, 2019–20; CSDS-Lokniti, 2019⁸.

The table clarifies this relationship. In Kerala as well as Tamil Nadu, where female literacy exceeds 80% and workforce participation is comparatively high, women are far more likely to report independent voting decisions. In contrast, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, states with lower educational attainment and some of the lowest rates of women's labour force participation, show the weakest electoral autonomy.

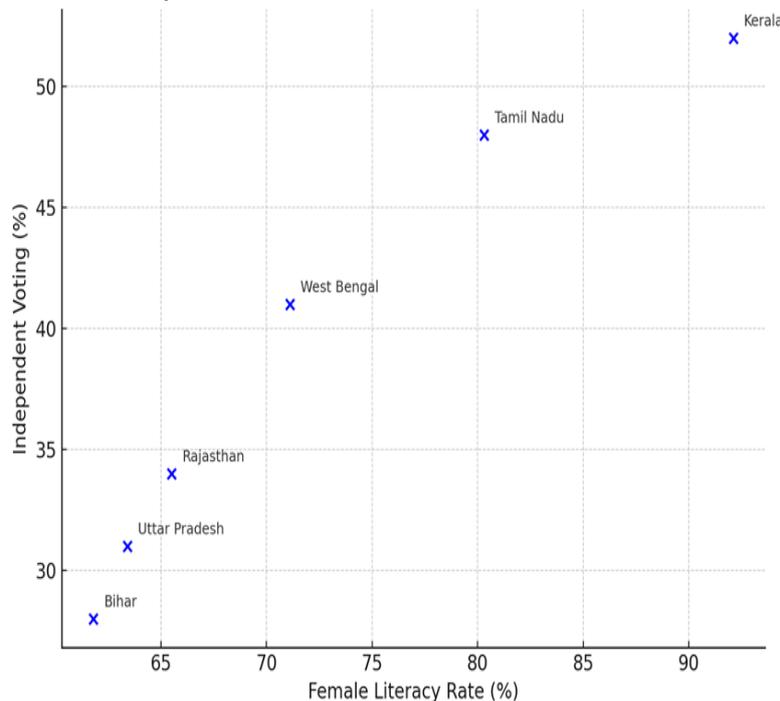


Figure 3: Correlation between Female Literacy and Independent Voting (2019)

The scatterplot clearly shows how states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu cluster in the top-right (high literacy, higher independent voting), while Bihar and Uttar Pradesh cluster in the bottom-left (low literacy, low autonomy).

*Source: Census of India 2011¹⁸; CSDS-Lokniti, 2019⁸.

The relationship highlighted in Figure 3 reinforces the idea that patriarchy is sustained in places where women remain economically and socially dependent. Limited opportunity to education and paid employment strengthens male authority within households and, by extension, over electoral choice. Conversely, where women participate more fully in education and the workforce, they are better positioned to form independent preferences and resist patriarchal mediation at the ballot box. These patterns underline a crucial point: numerical participation alone does not equate to empowerment. Unless structural inequalities in education and employment are addressed, women's ballots will continue to be exercised under patriarchal supervision, regardless of rising voter turnout.



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7. RURAL–URBAN DIVIDE IN WOMEN’S ELECTORAL AUTONOMY

So far, the discussion has mainly centred on rural areas of India; a comparison with urban contexts underscores the unique ways in which patriarchy operates in rural spaces. The CSDS-Lokniti survey data reveal a substantial rural–urban gap in women’s electoral autonomy.

Table 5: Rural vs. Urban Women’s Voting Autonomy (2019 Lok Sabha Elections)

Location	Independent Voting (%)	Family-Influenced Voting (%)	No Role in Decision (%)
Rural Women	34	54	12
Urban Women	49	43	8

*Source: CSDS-Lokniti Post-Poll Survey, 2019 8.

The contrast is striking and noteworthy. While nearly half of urban women reported making independent choices in 2019, only approximately one-third of rural women did so. Conversely, more than half of rural women admitted to following family instructions, compared to 43% of women in urban areas. The share of women with “no role” in the decision-making was also higher in rural contexts.

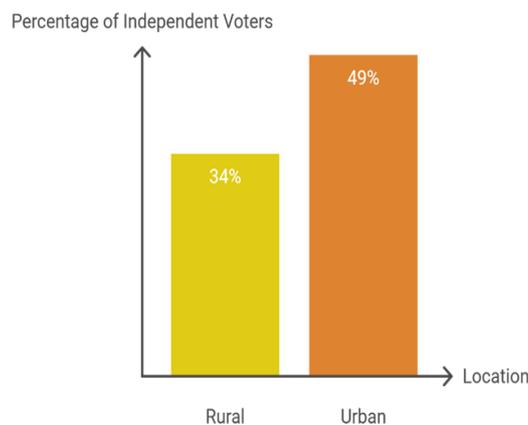


Figure 4: Rural vs. Urban Women’s Independent Voting (2019)

*Source: CSDS-Lokniti Post-Poll Survey, 2019⁸.

These findings highlight how structural inequalities shape electoral behaviour. Urban women generally have greater access to education, employment opportunities, and media exposure, which enhances their ability to form and assert independent preferences. By contrast, rural women face

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limited mobility, weaker access to information, and stronger household and community controls, all of which heighten patriarchal influence over their ballots.

This divide has direct implications for the democracy. Although urban women may be more autonomous in their voting choices, they represent a smaller share of the female electorate than rural women. Rural women, who make up the majority of the population, continue to cast ballots under patriarchal supervision. The results show that patriarchal mediation in rural India exerts a disproportionate influence on electoral outcomes, reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than challenging them.

In short, the rural–urban divide underscores that patriarchy is not evenly distributed but is shaped by the structural context. Where education, mobility, and employment opportunities expand, women are better positioned to exercise their electoral autonomy. Where such conditions remain absent, as in much of rural India, patriarchal control continues to define women's relationship with the ballot box.

8. SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

The evidence presented in the preceding sections points to a persistent paradox at the heart of women's political participation in rural India. On one hand, official turnout figures indicate that women have closed, and in some cases surpassed, the gap with men. In contrast, survey data reveal that autonomy in decision-making remains heavily constrained by patriarchal authority. This contradiction between presence and power runs through every level of the analysis.

The turnout–autonomy gap is perhaps the most striking finding of this study. As Table 3 shows, nearly 67% of women cast ballots during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, but only 36% reported making independent choices. More than half acknowledged that their votes aligned with family instructions, while a smaller share had no role in the decision. This gap highlights how formal inclusion does not necessarily translate into a substantive political agency.

The regional divide adds another dimension to this issue. Women in Hindi heartland states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan reported the lowest levels of independent voting, whereas those in Kerala, as well as Tamil Nadu, recorded significantly higher levels. These contrasts reflect deeper differences in kinship systems, literacy, and traditions of social reform. In the north, rigid patriarchal norms and low female workforce participation reinforce household control over ballot boxes. In the south, higher education and employment opportunities give women greater room to assert their choices, though patriarchal mediation has by no means disappeared.

The relationship between literacy, workforce participation, and autonomy provides a structural explanation for these patterns. As Table 4 and Figure 3 illustrate, states with greater female literacy and labour force involvement also show higher levels of independent voting. In regions where women remain socially and economically dependent on men, patriarchal authority continues to dominate the electoral sphere.

Finally, the rural–urban divide reinforces these conclusions. While urban women demonstrate relatively higher autonomy, rural women, who constitute the majority of the female electorate,



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remain bound by household and community controls. As Table 5 and Figure 4 showed, only about one-third of rural women reported independent voting, compared with nearly half of urban women. This difference underlines how structural inequalities in mobility, information access, and education intensify patriarchal influence in rural areas.

Taken collectively, these findings indicate that patriarchy functions not as a residual cultural practice but as a structural force embedded in Indian democracy. It operates across multiple levels, households, kinship groups, communities, and even regional political cultures, to constrain women's electoral choices. As a result, while women's turnout is often celebrated as a marker of democratic success, their ballots frequently remain under constraint, reflecting the persistence of patriarchal control rather than the expansion of political freedom.

9. CONCLUSION

The trajectory of women's participation in India's democracy is often narrated as a story of progress. Rising turnout figures are celebrated as evidence that women, particularly in rural areas, have become active participants in the political dynamics. Yet, the analysis exhibited here indicates that this narrative is incomplete. Behind the impressive numbers lies a more sobering reality: women's ballots remain constrained by patriarchal authority, which continues to shape how many of them vote and for whom.

The data make this contradiction unmistakable. In 2019, women matched and even slightly outpaced men in turnout, but barely a third reported casting a ballot independently. The majority acknowledged voting according to family instructions. Such patterns reveal that the principle of universal adult franchise, though secure in law, is compromised in practice. Women's votes may be counted, but their opinions are often muted by household and community control.

Regional and rural–urban variations reinforce this picture. In the north, where patriarchal kinship systems remain particularly rigid and women's access to literacy and employment is limited, electoral autonomy is at its weakest. In the south, higher literacy and stronger traditions of social reform have established more space for women to exercise independence, though patriarchal mediation has not disappeared. Urban women report greater autonomy than their rural counterparts. Still, rural women form the bulk of India's female electorate, giving patriarchal constraints in these areas disproportionate weight in shaping electoral outcomes.

Taken collectively, these findings emphasize a central paradox of India's democracy: women are numerically visible but politically constrained. Their presence in the polling booth does not always signify freedom of choice; often, it reflects the extension of patriarchal authority into the democratic domain. To focus solely on turnout is to mistake participation for empowerment.

India's democracy thus remains marked by an unfinished project. Universal suffrage has been achieved in form, but not yet in substance. As long as patriarchal authority continues to mediate women's electoral behaviour, democracy in rural India will remain partial, its promise of equality unrealized. Women's ballots under constraint remind us that numbers alone do not make a democracy; genuine autonomy is what gives those numbers meaning.



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10. AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

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11. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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