

# Gender-based Strategies & Electoral Politics in India Through the Lens of Public Choice Theory and Capability Approach

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## Abstract

*The paper is written in the context of the rising electoral gender ratio and consequent competition among the political parties to mobilise the vote and support of the women voters. Its objective is to examine gender-based strategies and electoral politics in India through the lens of two salient theoretical frameworks, namely public choice theory (PCT) and capability approach (CA). In other words, the objective of the paper is to ascertain if gender-based strategies and electoral politics in India could lead to a situation of bliss where women empowerment and sustainable development agendas converge. It uses the lens of public choice theory (PCT) to understand the collective behaviour of women as voters and how their demands are responded to by the political parties. The paper argues that driven by the interest of attracting voters and converting them into supporters and members might make it incumbent upon the political parties to draw up their manifestos for their welfare. This welfare emphasis in turn might lead to sustainable political success for the parties; and more inclusive & equitable development. The capability approach (CA) is used to understand how their participation in the electoral process enhances women's greater entitlement to health, education and other measures and thus expands capabilities/opportunities for them. Making the development process more inclusive and equitable. The common outcome of sustainable polity, economy and society evident from these two approaches is shown by way of*

*an intersection between the PCT and CA frameworks. The paper then draws a gender based electoral strategic direction framework for discerning the pathways implying the various combinations of the ego states & life positions of the contestants and the voters. Finally, the paper evaluates the relevance of gender-based politics in terms of the opportunities for and challenges to the realization of the vision 'Viksit Bharat @2047' in alignment with sustainable development goals.*

**Keywords:** Electoral Gains, Gender-based Strategies, Public Choice Theory, Capabilities Approach, Viksit Bharat, SDGs

## 1. Introduction

Right from day one, that is 26 January 1950, Republic of India has bestowed universal adult franchise in deference to the fundamental right of all its citizens—male or female to equality (Basu, 1966). Our constitution makers believed that the political right to women would be a means to her social and economic emancipation as well. Although not related to it alone, yet the electoral gender ratio is at least an important indicator of women's political participation and their representation as contributors to and the beneficiaries of the development of a nation (Ghosh, 2022; United Nations, 2005).

The political participation of women in India has undergone a remarkable transformation, with trends highlighting their increasing influence on electoral

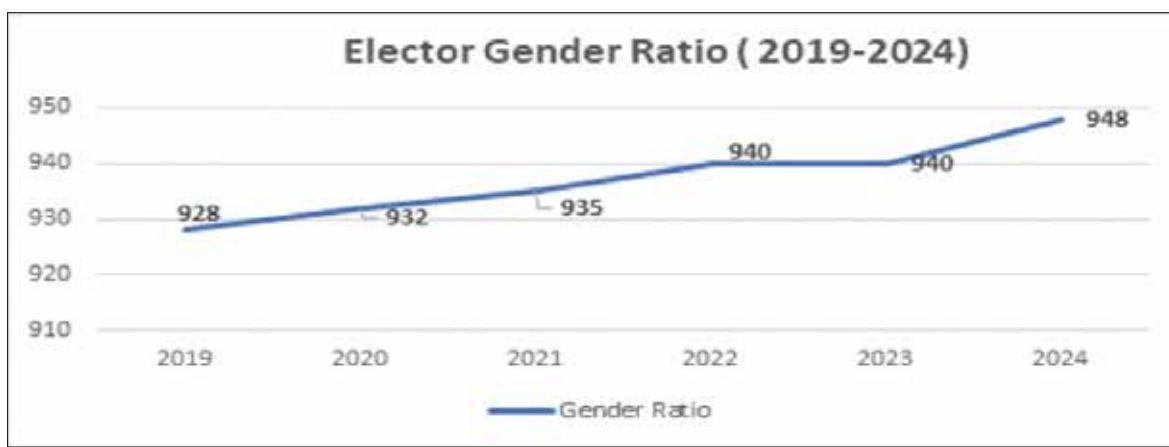
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outcomes and the narrowing gender gap in voter turnout. Over the decades, the electoral gender ratio has consistently improved and has risen from 715 female voters per 1,000 male voters in the 1960s to 883 in the 2000s. It reached an all-time high of 948 female voters per 1,000 males in 2024 marking a 9-percentage-point reduction in the gender gap since 2010 representing the smallest gap in India's electoral history. For the first

time, women constituted nearly half of the total voter turnout in the 2024 General Elections symbolizing their growing role as an influential and decisive voting bloc (PIB., 2024b). The least-ever gender gap in the 2024 elections as shown in Figure 1 reflects not only statistical progress but also a broader societal transformation in the attitude of the women as they become more empowered (Dhingra & Dev, 2024; Singh, 2019).

**Figure 1: Temporal Behaviour of Electoral Gender Ratio**



Source: PIB. (2024b)

The narrowing gender gap has spurred political parties to recognize the importance of women voters and adapt their electoral strategies accordingly. With women demonstrating higher turnout rates in many states including UP, Kerala, and West Bengal political parties are increasingly prioritizing gender-centric policies to address their needs. Thus, women are transitioning from being passive participants to active agents of change who are influencing electoral outcomes and governance priorities.

### Objectives of the Paper

This paper delves into the possible intersectionality between Buchanan's public choice theory (PCT) and Sen's capability approach (CA) of development in explaining gender-based strategies in the context of electoral politics in India (Buchanan, 1968; Sen, 1985; Sen, 2001) It argues that although independent yet the public choice and capabilities approach intersect in

ways- positive and normative- that may provide useful insights into the gender-based strategies (GBS) in India and elsewhere. Further, it aims to develop a gender-based electoral strategic direction framework to explore pathways through various combinations of the ego states and life positions of contestants and voters. And suggests the approach to reach the ultimate bliss. The study evaluates the relevance of gender-based strategies in terms of the opportunities and challenges in realizing the vision of 'Viksit Bharat @2047,' aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.

The method chosen is to explore the intersection between public choice theory and develop a directional matrix for gender-based electoral strategies that enable the realization of the idea and ideals of diversity, inclusion and equity on the one hand and the other aspects of sustainable development.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the present

section, an attempt is made to elaborate the context of the paper and state its purpose. Section II is devoted to a discussion of GBS in the context of public choice theory and capability approach. In Section III the intersectionality between the PCT and the CA is explored. Section IV contains conclusions and a discussion of the implications in the context of the idea of India as a developed nation, that is the Vision Viksit Bharat @ 2047, aligned with achievement of sustainable development goals (SDGs).

## 2. Theoretical Frameworks

### Public Choice Theory

Within the Neoclassical Counter-Revolution framework, the public choice theory challenges the assumption that governments always act in the public interest. Instead, Buchanan (1968) introduces the idea that political actors are driven by self-interest similar to individuals in a market. It treats voters, politicians and bureaucrats as rational agents. Women as a rising electoral force exercise their voting power based on perceived benefits that align with their priorities such as safety, education, healthcare, economic security. Just as firms keep on innovating to meet the desired demands of consumers, political parties craft gender-specific strategies to appeal to women voters. These strategies not only address immediate electoral objectives but also foster long-term trust and loyalty further solidifying the party's position in future electoral cycles.

In the process of attracting the voters by satisfying their “demand”, competition among compelling parties makes them more efficient and encourages parties to be more responsive to women's concerns. It should then make sense for them to turn their customers into clients; clients into advocates & ambassadors; and ambassadors into evangelists. In other words, cultivation of a woman voters as a constituency must lead to their enrollment as members of the party; as party candidates in state legislatures and parliament; and in the cabinet. These

women then can act as influencers in drawing more women to vote for and affiliate with the party. What results in effect is greater inclusion and equity in matters related to health and education for girls, legal protections against gender-based violence and institutions that reinforce not only gender equality but also the adoption of feminine ethics and values that would make any polity, economy and society more sustainable and inclusive.

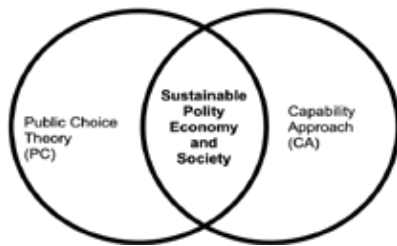
### The Capability Approach

The capability approach developed by economist and philosopher Amartya Sen provides a holistic framework for evaluating well-being, development and social justice (Sen, 1985; Sen, 2001). It focuses on expanding capabilities of individuals implying freedom, that is, to lead a life one values rather than solely measuring resources or income. Central to this approach are two concepts (i) ‘capabilities’ which represent opportunities or freedoms such as access to education, healthcare; and (ii) ‘functionings’ which are the realized achievements of these opportunities like being educated or healthy. By emphasizing the role of agency, the women in the present context, the approach highlights the importance of autonomy and the ability to make meaningful choices and thus, contributing to the holistic and sustainable development of the polity, economy and society.

### 3. Intersection Between PCT and CA

The intersection between public choice theory and capability approach provides a nuanced understanding of the rationale and impact of gender-based strategies. While public choice theory explains the motivation behind these policies driven by political actors seeking electoral gains, the capability approach focuses on the broader societal benefits that accrue and enhance the capabilities of women. Both these approaches show congruence in terms of sustainable politics, economy and society as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Intersection Between Public Choice Theory and Capability Approach**



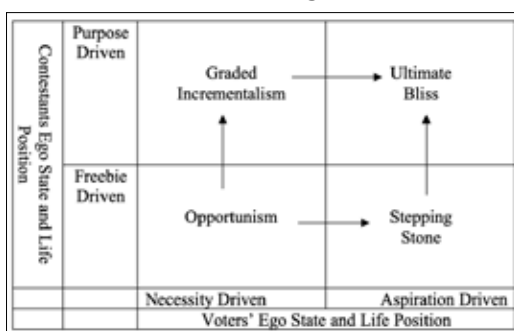
Source: Self

**Gender-Based Strategies Directional Matrix**

The four-quadrants of the gender-based strategies (GBS) directional matrix, representing south-west, south-east, north-west and north-east directions have been respectively labeled as opportunism, stepping stone, graded incrementalism and ultimate bliss.

The paper uses these four quadrants of the matrix as depicted in Figure 3 to show how gender-based strategies can evolve from opportunistic freebies addressing basic needs to purpose-driven empowerment strategies targeting women’s aspirations. However, it would be pertinent here to elaborate the ideas of ego state and life positions that have been borrowed from psychology (Berne, 1985). Whereas ego states are essentially transactional and experienced in the moment, life positions/values imply more fundamental beliefs that drive people’s behaviour. For example, if a political party is driven by the belief that votes can be bought in via freebies then rather than ideological adoption of the gender issues in its vision it may repetitively resort to freebie driven electoral strategies. This belief may in turn be reinforced by the opportunistic expectations of the voters.

**Figure 3: Gender-based Strategies Directional Matrix**



Source: Self

**Opportunism:** The coordinate labeled ‘opportunism’ is at the south-west end of the matrix. It shows a situation where the political opportunism of the voters and the contestants /contesting political parties coincide. The power-seeking parties offer freebies that are lapped by opportunity deprived and necessity driven voters. In a situation of vast inequality any subsidisation and benefit transfer can really swing in the votes for the contestant / party that is able to touch the pulse of the voters. The freebie schemes target necessity-driven voters prioritizing survival needs through direct benefits. For instance, ‘Ujjwala Yojana’ (2016) provided free 103.3 million LPG connections to rural households by 2024 (PIB., 2024e). It improved health and safety for rural women by reducing exposure to smoke from traditional cooking methods. Other examples include ‘Swachh Bharat Mission’ (2014) prioritized sanitation infrastructure and built more than 100 million toilets across the country directly addressing women’s safety and dignity in rural areas (PIB., 2024a). These initiatives were instrumental in building trust among necessity-driven voters but can be perceived as opportunistic as they addressed immediate needs without addressing systemic barriers.

**Stepping-Stone:** Freebie-driven contestants-aspiration-driven voters coordinate in the south-east quadrant. Stepping Stone implies that the voters buy-in the freebie politics of the contestants in the hope of getting more freedom or leveraging their emancipation. Thus, the women utilise the savings arising from the consumption subsidization as investment in sustainably empowering in education, health, housing, capacity building and other ventures. ‘Beti Bachao Beti Padhao’ (2015) aimed to improve the sex ratio by raising awareness about the importance of girls’ education. State-specific initiatives such as ‘Rajshree Yojana’ (Rajasthan, 2016), ‘Kanyashree Prakalpa’ (West Bengal, 2013), ‘Pudhumai Penn Scheme’ (Tamil Nadu, 2022)) were launched to support girl child education and provide financial incentives for girl child education so that it encourages higher aspirations and also delays early marriage. ‘Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana’

(2017) provided maternity benefits combining financial support with health outcomes. ‘Lakshmi Bhandar’ (West Bengal, 2021) and ‘Mukhyamantri Ladli Bahna Yojana’ (Madhya Pradesh, 2023) introduced direct monthly cash transfers to support women in achieving financial stability and enabling them to focus on long-term aspirations.

**Graded Incrementalism:** The north-west quadrant at the purpose-driven contestants- necessity-driven voters. It addresses systemic barriers to gender emancipation in sync with its long-run purpose while harnessing the necessity-driven voters in the short-run. Such a strategy is exemplified through structured programs that systematically enhance women’s capabilities over time. Initiatives such as ‘Stand-Up India’ (2016) provided access to credit for women entrepreneurs to foster financial independence. ‘Mahila Nidhi’ (Rajasthan, 2022) focused on supporting rural women through microfinance and self-help groups. Additional examples include ‘Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana- National Rural Livelihood Mission’(DAY-NRLM, 2016) empowered women through income-generating activities. ‘National Nutrition Mission’ (2018) addresses malnutrition among women and children while promoting healthier life style.

**Ultimate Bliss:** The north-east quadrant at the intersection of aspiration-driven women voters and purpose-driven political outfits is the ideal to strive for. Rightly, therefore it has been referred to as the ‘ultimate bliss’. This quadrant manifests in the initiatives that empower women comprehensively so that it enables meaningful participation across economic, social and political domains. For example, ‘Mission Shakti’ (2021) demonstrating a multidimensional approach to empowerment integrated safety, financial independence and leadership development into a single framework. Similarly, ‘Safe City’ initiative (2018) used technology-driven solutions to ensure women’s safety across many cities. ‘Kudumbashree’ 1997 (Kerala) expanded the scope of women’s self-help groups into areas like agro-processing and digital services. Programs

such as ‘Mahila Samman Savings Certificate’ (2023) encouraged financial independence by offering savings opportunities tailored to women’s needs. Other examples include ‘Free Public Transport Schemes’ in many states such as Delhi, Maharashtra enhanced women’s mobility and access to opportunities. Pink Protection Project (Kerala, 2021) ensured women’s safety in public and workspaces. According to Women Reservation Bill 2023, thirty-three per cent of seats in the assemblies and the Lok Sabha would be reserved for only female candidates is a milestone achievement. A rightful place in legislative chambers is likely to foster policies that uplift marginalized groups, drive grassroots development and foster harmony and thereby, achieving a vision of ultimate bliss for purpose-driven voters (FitzGerald & Valdini, 2020)

#### 4. Conclusion and Implications

The study explores the potential of gender-based strategies (GBS) founded on principles of public choice theory (PCT) and capability approach (CA) to contribute towards the realization of core objectives of Vision Viksit Bharat 2047, that is, sustainable polity, economy and society (Virmani, 2024; Sharma, 2024). The four quadrants approach used discusses the behavioural patterns implying gender-based strategies and the outcomes these might lead to depending on voters’ and contestants’ ego state and life position. The GBS directional matrix developed here as a result shows at least two pathways via ‘graded incrementalism’ and ‘stepping stone’ implying the contestants / contesting parties and voters respectively can reach the most desired outcome, ‘ultimate bliss’. The situation of opportunism that the results of the directional analysis acknowledge is an inevitable aspect of the political and economic reality of a society characterised by a legacy of gender-based inequities and inequalities. The good news is that a breakthrough is possible.

#### *Achieving Viksit Bharat@2047*

The rise of women as a voting bloc has led to substantial changes in governance with a stronger focus on welfare

programs and public services, laying the foundation for achieving Viksit Bharat@2047. From driving electoral strategies to reshaping governance and challenging societal norms, women are at the forefront of India's transformation. Empowering women to participate fully in political and economic life is not just an electoral necessity but a developmental imperative (U.N. Women, 2015).

States with higher female representation in governance have demonstrated notable improvements in socio-economic indicators (Deshmukh, 2005;). States like Rajasthan, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh which actively implemented sanitation programs reported a significant reduction in open defecation and also had an improvement in women's health outcomes (PIB. 2022; 2024a; 2024d). Female literacy in states with proactive gender policies such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu exceeded 90% compared to the national average of 78%. India's MMR has dropped significantly from 130 (2014–16) to 97 (2018–20). While few states such as Kerala Maharashtra Telangana, Andhra Pradesh have met the SDG target of <70, many others still report MMRs above 100 requiring targeted efforts to bridge regional gaps (PIB., 2022). Investments in maternal health can reduce mortality rates with long-term benefits for human development.

Women's labor force participation has risen from 18% in 2015 to 41.7 % in 2024 driven by government initiatives promoting financial independence (PIB, 2024c). McKinsey Global Institute Report (2015) laid the emphasis on gender equality and its impact on economic growth - "Achieving gender equality in India would have a larger economic impact there than in any other region in the world—\$700 billion of added GDP in 2025—but comprehensive change is needed". The World Bank Report (2018) highlights the importance of female education and states "Limited educational opportunities for girls and barriers to completing 12 years of education cost countries between \$15 trillion and \$30 trillion in lost lifetime productivity and earnings".

Programs like 'Stand-Up India' facilitated loans for 1,44,787 women entrepreneurs encouraging economic participation (PIB. 2023). Increased female representation in governance is another sign of progress. As of 2024, 13.7 % of Lok Sabha members of parliament are women still short of the global average of 26% (IPU Parline, 2024). States like Bihar, Odisha have excelled in grassroots representation with women holding 50% of leadership positions in local governance(PIB., 2024f) Women leaders have demonstrated transformative governance by prioritizing welfare and social equity Women-led self-help groups contributed to the state's rural development by increasing household incomes (Kumar et al., 2021; Bhorse, 2024). Research studies shows that states with women in leadership roles allocate more funds to education and healthcare, directly benefiting marginalized /disadvantaged group (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Ballington, 2008; Saikia, 2019). Initiatives such as the 'One Stop Centres' and the 'Women Helpline Scheme' provide immediate support to survivors of violence, ensuring justice and rehabilitation. Legal reforms such as the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 have strengthened the framework against sexual offenses, promoting accountability and reducing impunity. Programs to sensitize law enforcement and judicial institutions on gender issues are helping to create inclusive and responsive systems. Moreover, promoting women's participation in governance and decision-making enhances the inclusivity of institutions and fosters a culture of peace and justice (Ballington, 2008; Political participation of women. (n.d.).

Women's empowerment is critical to achieving Viksit Bharat@2047 with their contributions directly linked to key developmental goals. By integrating women into decision-making processes, India can create a governance model that is inclusive, effective and reflective of the needs of all citizens. The upward trend in women's political participation underscores the urgency of institutionalizing gender-focused strategies that transcend electoral gains. By embedding these

initiatives into the core of governance, India can not only achieve its developmental aspirations but also serve as a global exemplar of inclusive growth and sustainable development.

These gender-based strategies expanding access to health, education, credit, skill development, and entrepreneurship opportunities for women can drive economic independence and reduce poverty aligning with sustainable development goals such as ‘SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Quality Education (SDG 4), and Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (SDG 16)’ (United Nations, n.d.).

### **Challenges That Remain**

It is important to take cognizance of the challenges before the gender-based political agenda in India. Gender disparities manifest at home, in public spaces, educational institutions, workplaces and communities, reinforced by media, textbooks and entrenched patriarchal structures. Girls often face limitations in mobility, decision-making, and access to education and healthcare. Many are subjected to early marriage, domestic work, violence and exploitation because of poor financial condition or social norms. Addressing these issues requires societal transformation and greater investment in empowering women and girls.

Embedding of gender concerns in governance, budgetary allocations and institutional accountability and assurance beyond head-count compliance are the measures that can transform gender-based strategies into tools for sustainable empowerment and inclusive development in India and anywhere else.

As India approaches 2047, the integration of women and feminine ethics in policy discourse and the programs of national development is an imperative that cannot be ignored. Let us not only make her vote count but also her voice and values guide and shape India’s destiny and that of the world. Indeed if the electoral competition

can break free from short-sighted opportunism, gender-based politics in India and anywhere else can be a potent mechanism for the realization of sustainable healthy polity, economy and society.

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