

What Women Want

Praise for the Book

‘In her insightful and topical new book Ruhi Tewari, a seasoned political journalist, has focused on the phenomenon of the increasing importance of the female voter. Percentages of women elected representatives remains abysmally low in our country, but as Tewari points out, all political parties now comprehend the decisive and distinctive role played by the woman voters in the last decade. Prime Minister Modi was among the first to directly engage with women voters with his *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* campaign and also usher in women-focused electoral schemes. AAP’s meteoric rise in the Delhi assembly polls was due in part to reaching out to women’s aspirations. Tewari analyzes how all political parties have now taken the cue with promises of welfare delivery programmes aimed at the female voter.’ – **Coomi Kapoor**

‘This book is a must-read. It focuses on a key and perhaps the most important change in India’s elections: the power and the swing of women voters. Ruhi Tewari combines data with reporting from the field to highlight the impact of the new and independent women vote.’ – **Prannoy Roy**

‘What women want is a good question in a country that enshrined universal adult franchise in its Constitution and was led by a woman directly or indirectly for more than 23 out of 73 years since its first election. This exhaustive study by Ruhi Tewari, with a ground reporter’s rigour and an analyst’s sharp intellect, brings many answers. Even as participation and power to choose has improved, empowerment has not. Women account for just around 8 per cent of MPs elected since 1952, and a handful, including successors to political dynasties, have risen to top jobs. Ruhi’s book is no couch punditry. It takes us across the country, to its remotest parts. She paints a picture of rising awareness, and highlights what’s missing. All parties want women’s vote but are shy of empowering them. This book is essential reading to appreciate the magnitude of this contradiction and why it’s unsustainable.’ – **Shekhar Gupta**

What Women Want

Understanding the *Female* Voter
in Modern India

Ruhi Tewari

 juggernaut

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*To Kaka,
my maternal grandfather Lakshmi Prasad Goswami,
who taught us that there is nothing above integrity,
and from whom I inherited my love of politics.*

Contents

<i>Author's Note</i>	ix
1. Introduction	1
2. Freebies: A Shot at Dignity	53
3. Her Favourite Politician	105
4. Caste, Faith and the Female Electorate	165
5. Conclusion	215
<i>Notes</i>	237
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	253

Author's Note

As journalists, we have to be extra mindful to give a balanced perspective when we cover elections on the ground. And for this, it is imperative to ensure that the voices of all stakeholders are adequately heard. Thus, we must speak to voters from across identities and backgrounds – be it region, religion, caste, gender, socio-economic status or education level.

Of these, I recall finding the balance in gender among the hardest to achieve when I first started covering elections in the winter of 2008. It wasn't always easy to find women willing to speak openly, to draw them out and to get them to express their political views, aspirations and anguish. And so, even journalists on the field would focus more on men across communities. They were, after all, more

Author's Note

vocal and decisive, which made for better quotes and soundbites.

Something, however, began to shift soon enough. The year 2014 ushered in a national conversation about the *mahila* (woman) vote. Four assembly elections across regions post 2014 made me realize that there was indeed something bigger happening. In the state polls in Uttar Pradesh in early 2017, Gujarat later that year, Tripura in early 2018 and Madhya Pradesh in the winter of that year, I made it a point to speak to young, often first-time voters by visiting colleges in both urban and semi-urban areas. To my surprise, I found the female students to be more vocal, clear-headed, aware and aspirational than the men. It was these young women that made me realize *she* had arrived as a voter and would go on to become the protagonist of many a book, most certainly of my first book.

At this point, it is imperative for me to clarify that I am not a psephologist, sociologist or data scientist. I am a journalist who has worked across three big news platforms to cover elections for over 17 years, the most recent being the 2025 Delhi assembly polls. I've tracked four Lok Sabha elections, over

Author's Note

a dozen state assembly elections across regions and many important by-elections. In this process, I have spoken to innumerable voters – both men and women – the number of which I find quite impossible to estimate. My craft has been to travel extensively, speak to as many voters as possible and convey the mood on the ground. I have also spent considerable time on the field exploring the impact of welfare delivery – something that eventually ties in intricately to voter behaviour.

This book is a culmination of my years of field reporting and is, hence, a journalistic account. The data I have relied on is based on secondary sources, but the heart of the book lies in the voter trends and anecdotal evidence I have found over the last nearly two decades.

The idea is not just to trace the evolution of India's woman voter but to also amplify her voice and vision with accuracy and insight.

1

Introduction

The Rise of the Woman Voter

Amsa Amma from Sirigiripuram in Hyderabad was 21 when she cast her first ever vote. It was the 1977 Lok Sabha election, held under the dark shadow of the Emergency. That year marked one of the most turbulent periods in independent India's history, with political emotions across the country running high. Amsa Amma's memories have blurred with age, but she distinctly recalls the evenings at home, filled with impassioned, drawn-out political conversations. As the women of the house busied themselves in the kitchen, brewing endless cups of tea, the men from the neighbourhood gathered to talk politics.

She was intrigued by the heated discussions she overheard from the kitchen, though she did not quite understand how her opinion – or her

vote – mattered. She was instructed to go and vote by her father-in-law and was also told whom to vote for. At the polling station, her husband acted as her chaperone. She vaguely remembers him whispering the name of the party and the symbol into her ear as she stood in the queue.

‘We didn’t know much about politics. And politicians never bothered with us either. We did as we were told,’ she recalls, her eyes glazing over as her mind drifts back to a bygone era.

Imagine a woman voter in India in the 1970s. She had no real political identity of her own and wielded little electoral weight. She was confined to a few paragraphs in political party manifestoes, a perfunctory ‘*bhaiyyon aur beheno*’ (brothers and sisters) mention in political speeches. She wasn’t at the core of policymaking or political strategizing. She was, at best, a collateral beneficiary of umbrella schemes. She remained subsumed under larger identities of caste, religion, demography, geography, ethnicity and more. She had little political agency and even less freedom to express her views. She was far behind her male counterparts in her voter turnout. She was assumed to vote based

on the diktats of the male members of society, and politicians never bothered to address her independently. Even popular culture represented the common person's anguish and disenchantment with the system through the lens of the 'angry young man'.

Fast forward to today. The very same woman voter in India has moved from the periphery to the centre of electoral politics, policymaking and welfare debates. She is asserting her democratic rights and has outshone men in turning out to vote. Every political party is vying for her attention. She constitutes a big chunk of campaign speeches. She has a slew of welfare schemes tailored specially for her. She is far more confident about expressing her views. She is not just another voter queuing up to vote, but is someone every major political party is courting. Voting, for her, is no longer just a duty to be done or a box to be ticked. She knows her vote matters and is willing to use it as an instrument of assertion.

Make no mistake – patriarchy in India has not been smashed. The deeply entrenched gender biases in our socio-political milieu continue with tragic

brazenness. Yet there is one aspect in which women now find themselves on a pedestal, surpassing even men in importance: voting. Women are increasingly looking at voting as a key tool of empowerment, one that can place them as equals with men in a deeply gendered and skewed society. They now want to be heard. They want not just their vote but also their voice to be counted. They understand the power of the ballot and realize that a vote isn't merely a mechanical and mundane duty to be performed at the behest of others but their unequivocal right.

The rise in the number of women voting is quite the story in itself, but the real story of a woman's vote in India is of what it has come to mean beyond the numbers.

The power of the female vote does not stem from delivering decisive victories to one party or another but from the fact that no party can afford to ignore it. From being just another subset of larger voter segments, women have now come to define a very unique electorate. They are, in fact, the most significant electorate because they are successfully punching above their weight. From the point of view of numbers, they are now at par with men, but from

the perspective of being central to and influencing a political party's governance and electoral agenda, they are far ahead.

What makes this electorate remarkable is that it is far from homogenous, and yet, it commands a collective bargaining power. Women wade through multiple identities – caste, religion, ethnicity, demography – and their voting decisions are hardly immune to these schisms. They, however, remain glued together by a common history of social biases, political marginalization, deprivation and disempowerment. In every other identity, they remained second to men.

Today, all political leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, are vying to outdo each other in underscoring the idea of women's welfare and to be seen as pushing initiatives that can contribute to that. Ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha election, the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) launched its manifesto, focusing on what it termed as the four pillars of society: *garib* (the poor); *yuva* (the youth); *annadata* (the farmer) and *naari* (woman). 'Naari' has become the biggest buzzword in Indian elections, and political parties

are constantly on their toes to pander to this electorate.

The importance the woman voter today enjoys is often more strategic than sincere, still driven by a largely male perspective, given how women remain severely under-represented in political decision-making and policymaking. Yet, within this opportunism lies a subtle but steady shift. The sheer number of policies and schemes devised around the woman voter, the endless poll promises made to entice her and the commitment with which the political class serenades her have meant that she now finally feels like a stakeholder in the political and governance spheres. The gamut of programmes targeted at her have helped fill gaps in her life, some quite significantly elevating her everyday existence.

More women turning up to vote is a huge leap, but the more important point is how they are increasingly voting more independently. In my extensive travels on the ground during various state and parliamentary elections, I have seen the graph change in a matter of just two decades. There is greater incentive and desire among women to vote in election after election, and an unexpectedly large