A battle for female voters is changing India's elections

Politicians are doling out cash to get their support

The Economist, April 14 th, 2026

SHUNTED TO THE back, the men must wait their turn. At an election rally on the outskirts of Kolkata, in the state of West Bengal, an all-female marching group leads the way. Women are at the centre of campaigning in the state's election, which takes place in two stages on April 23rd and 29th. Winning over female voters is also crucial in the three other states and a union territory that are holding polls this month.

It was not always this way. For decades the female voter was a minor figure in Indian politics. Before independent INDIA'S first general election, in 1951-52, almost 3m women were struck off voter lists because they had registered not with their own names but simply as the "mothers" and "sisters" of male family members. Things have changed dramatically. Between 1962 and 2024, men's turnout in national elections inched up by just three percentage points. It rocketed by nearly 20 percentage points for women.

At India's latest parliamentary election, in 2024, a SLIGHTLY higher proportion of women than men turned out to vote (65.8% of women to 65.6% of men). That had happened just once before. At one constituency in West Bengal nearly 88% of eligible women had their say—a rate that is scarcely imaginable in most Western countries. That reflects in part the gradual empowerment of women, who are more likely to vote when they have a job, an education and a measure of independence from fathers and husbands. The biggest reason for one recent jump in female voting was a rise in female literacy, argues a study by analysts at the State Bank of India.

All this is altering HOW elections are fought. Female voters may be guided by different considerations than male ones. Less than 10% of women in one national survey said they plumped for a candidate because of "ideology". Men seem more easily riled than women by culture-war issues, as when politicians allege threats to Hinduism or claim a problem of "illegal infiltrators" from Muslim-majority places.

Instead, researchers find that women are more likely to be won over by tangible promises of welfare. Daily struggles in a male-dominated SOCIETY have given women a "more defined survival instinct" than men, says Ruhi Tewari in "What Women Want", a book on India's female voters. If the lot of women is improving, they remain about half as likely to

hold paid jobs as men—and as a result are much less confident that they will always be able to secure enough money to scrape by.

The battle for female voters helps to explain a striking recent change in state-level politics: a swift proliferation in GOVERNMENT cash-transfer schemes. At least 16 states operate programmes for which only women are eligible—up from only a few in 2022 (see map). The sums they supply range from about 800 to 2,500 rupees ($9-27) per month. They use varying criteria, such as age, income and marital status, to choose beneficiaries. Increasingly, elections are fought over such programmes.

West Bengal is a good place to see this play out. The women who are leading the rally in Khardah, a suburb of KOLKATA, support the incumbent chief minister, Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress (TMC). They wave placards advertising Lakshmir Bhandar, Ms Banerjee's flagship welfare programme. This hands cash of 1,500-1,700 rupees per month to women aged 25-60 who come from poor homes. They also talk up other local cash schemes, targeted at teenage girls, female farmers and widows. It proves hard to divert conversation to other election themes. What else would Shupriya Ghosh, 37, like to see from the state government? "More schemes!" she beams.

This shift in Indian politics is ATTRACTING much debate. Thoughtful cash-transfer schemes have real merits. They can increase consumption, reduce poverty, improve women's education and discourage early marriage, among other boons. Lakshmir Bhandar won praise in a 2023 report by the Pratichi Trust, an NGO based in Kolkata that researches ways to improve education, health and gender equality. Over 60% of the women it surveyed believed that the scheme strengthened their position within the family; 87% said it permitted them to invest in dreams beyond bare survival, such as training or entrepreneurship.

Yet sober observers of Indian democracy worry about the proliferation of cash programmes. Many are haphazard: they look like vote-buying dressed up as female emancipation. Mere weeks before Bihar's state election last November, India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies deposited 10,000 rupees in the accounts of 7.5m women under a livelihood scheme. This was constitutionally dubious. Its impact on the election was unclear, but by one estimate it may have boosted by a fifth the number of seats that the coalition went on to win.

That amplifies worries about costs. In the most recent financial year, authorities across India spent around 1.7trn rupees on unconditional cash-transfer programmes, particularly for women. About half the states with cash-transfer schemes run revenue deficits. In profligate West Bengal, state-government debt is 38% of GDP, approaching a record level. Lakshmir Bhandar alone consumes 10% of its revenue receipts. And the BJP is campaigning on a promise to double the money distributed through that scheme.

One big concern is that a craze for CASH transfers is distracting from policies that might more durably improve lives. Dipsita Dhar, running in the West Bengal elections for India's largest communist party, says it would be better to raise living standards through higher wages and improved working conditions—not through gifts from politicians that risk disappearing the moment they are booted out of office.

India's finance ministry RECENTLY warned that cash programmes risk crowding out investment in the delivery of education and health care—two things that could dramatically improve women's lot. Zaad Mahmood, a political scientist in Kolkata, notes that one of West Bengal's many schemes gives girls cash for staying in education—but says that it does nothing to save them from run-down classrooms or bad teachers. India's female voters have finally earned the attention of the political class. It's a shame that they are too rarely offered the truly transformative policies they deserve.