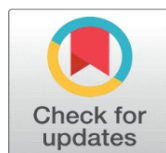
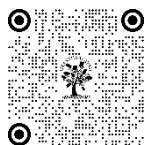


THE GRIM POLITICAL SCENARIO IN INDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyse the grim scenario of the political arena of India and the position of women in politics. Despite the fact that women are half of the world's population, their representation in political positions remains very poor. The study employs a secondary qualitative systematic review approach, and sources include academic journals, policy documents, electoral data, and newspapers of the last five years. Research shows that women face such barriers to leadership as centralized governance structures, patriarchal attitudes, institutional gender discrimination, and political violence. Therefore, one can identify activists and gender quotas as the viable instruments in the process of changing the status quo. The study stresses that structural changes and inclusive policies should be implemented to achieve fair representation of women in politics for the growth of India's democracy.

Keywords: Women, India, Gender Representation, Political Participation, Patriarchy, Policy Reform, Leadership Barriers, Democracy

1. INTRODUCTION

India, being the largest democratic country in the world, has shown improved gender equality over the decades. Nevertheless, the political description of systematic and profound patriarchal issues that limit the involvement and representation of women in politics. While the constitution and laws governing the country provide for gender equality, women still face severe marginalization in state assemblies, parliament and political positions. This research paper aims to discuss the relationship between the current grim political climate in India, with rising polarization, populism, and patriarchal sentiments on one hand and the exclusion of women in political positions on the other.

2. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

The grim political climate in India can be defined as authoritarianism, centralization of power, growing conservatism, censorship, and male chauvinism. There are certain trends in the Indian political system which have witnessed certain changes over the years, and certain trends such as concentrating power in the centre with an increase in nationalism (Singh, 2018). This aspect has impacted the representation of women in politics in this environment.

Women were able to secure till 2014 election there were only 63 women MPs which however is improvement from 59 seats in 2009. Still there is slow progress in women representation in politics in India (Rediff, 2009; Shree, 2019). This is evidenced by the following statistics that reveal the low representation of women despite the existing difficult political environment in India.

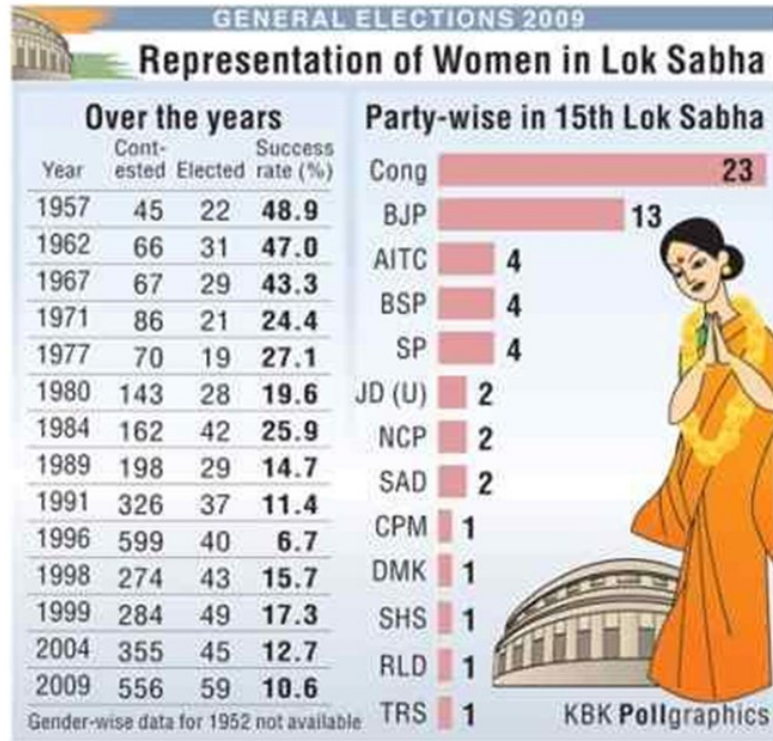


Figure 1: 15 Years Ago, Representation of Women in Lok Sabha (Source: Rediff, 2009)

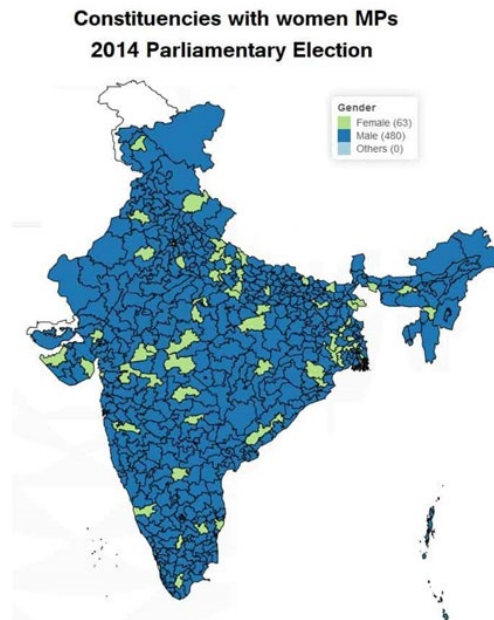


Chart courtesy: Lok Dhaba / Trivedi Centre for Political Data

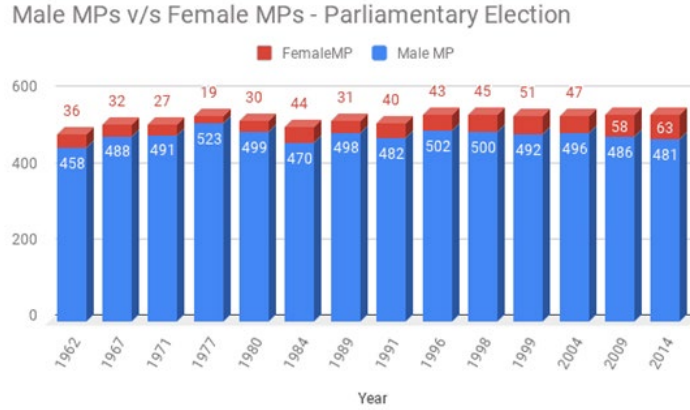


Figure 2: Representation of Women After 5 Years in 2014 [Source: Shree, 2019]

There are numerous reasons for such underrepresentation. Traditional cultural values and beliefs limit women's rights and deny them active participation in the political processes with aspirations for leadership (Childs & Hughes, 2018). The restriction of budget puts them in a position where they cannot adequately finance campaigns and, in most cases, have no adequate political tutelage to enable them to manoeuvre within the political landscape. On the same note, the aspect of gendered violence and character assassination is another strong discouragement (Rai & Spary, 2018). This is compounded by the current political climate that has a tendency towards polarization, which makes such changes much harder. This leads to parties promoting candidates with the dominant narrative, thus neglecting women who may seek different policies (Cassan & Vandewalle, 2017). As this research seeks to understand, these dynamics work coherently to exclude women, an argument that underscores the need for far-reaching political transformation aimed at empowering women.

3. RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This research aims to probe into the impact of India's highly grim political environment on women's representation in politics. While it attempts to analyse trends in women's political participation over the past decade, it also aims to understand how political narratives and models of governance shape their entry and access in political spaces, and the key barriers, including systemic bias, safety and lack of support that prevent women from entering political spaces. The study further seeks to recommend policy interventions that will encourage gender inclusivity and empower more women to participate meaningfully in politics.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study explored the role of India's political environment on women's representation by utilizing secondary qualitative systematic review methods. Academic journal articles, policy papers, news reports, NGO publications, and electoral data from the past five years were reviewed. Keywords like 'women in Indian politics,' 'gender representation,' 'patriarchy and politics,' and 'Indian women's political participation' were used in databases like *JSTOR*, *Scopus*, and *Google Scholar*. The literature was narrowed down with strict inclusion criteria of relevance, credibility of literature and study objectives. 13 research papers were finalised to collect the data at par with the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Data analysis was done using thematic analysis with axial coding. Thematic coding and synthesis were used to extract key themes and insights that enable a better understanding of the patterns, barriers and social and political factors impacting women's involvement in the current Indian politics.

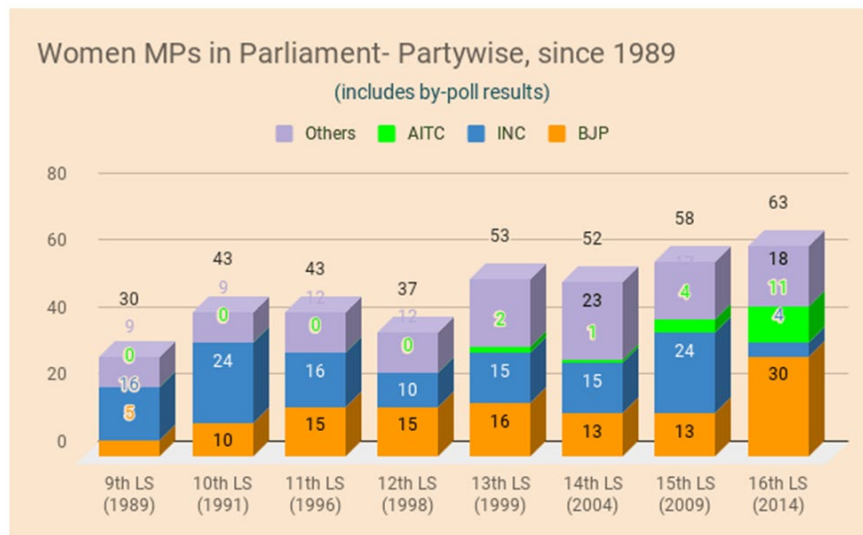
5. RESULTS

Table 1: Axial Coding

Authors	Keywords	Sub-Themes	Themes
Rai (2017)	Grassroots activism, party politics, representation, Political empowerment,	Women's engagement at the grassroots, limited transition to leadership roles	Theme 1: Women's political participation remains stagnant despite increased voter turnout and grassroots involvement
Yadav (2020)			
Sanyal, Rao & Prabhakar (2019)			
Paxton, Hughes & Barnes (2020)	Democratic regime, women's rights, institutional exclusion	Shrinking democratic space for women leaders	Theme 2: Centralized power and patriarchal narratives limit women's access to political leadership platforms
Chhachhi (2019)			
Basu (2016)			
Krook (2017)	Gender barriers, violence, stereotypes, local governance, gender bias	Fear of violence and stigma discourages female political entry	Theme 3: Systemic barriers, including gendered violence and lack of support, deter women from politics
Sinha et al. (2017)			
Sharma (2020)			
Biroli (2018)	Urban governance, policy change, empowerment,	Positive outcomes of local quotas, yet limited policy support	Theme 4: Inclusive policy reforms and gender quotas are essential for equitable political representation
Dey & Das (2020)			
McDermott (2020) Goyal (2020)			

Theme 1: Women's political participation remains stagnant despite increased voter turnout and grassroots involvement

In the last decade, female voter turnout in India has also increased, and this, to some extent, shows an upward trend in electoral participation. As stated by Rai (2017), programs such as the Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) by the Election Commission of India have been helpful in this capacity. For instance, the female turnout in the 2019 general elections stood at 67.18% compared to the male turnout of 67.01%, which was a sign of improvement compared to past years. Leaders like Hema Malini (BJP), Mahua Moitra (TMC), and Dimple Yadav (Samajwadi Party) have demonstrated women's aptitude for leadership by winning their respective seats. Nevertheless, as stated by Yadav (2020), they are still restricted to the periphery rather than being the rule of thumb. The recent appointment of Rekha Gupta as the Chief Minister of New Delhi is a positive sign, but such appointments are quite rare.



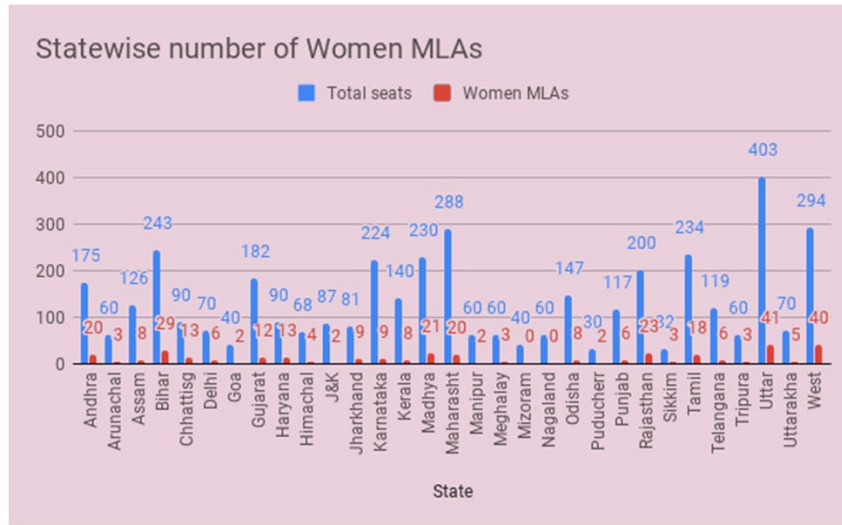


Figure 3: Women's MPs from Different Parties and States in India. [Source: Shree, 2019]

Nonetheless, Sanyal, Rao & Prabhakar (2019) stated that there has been a small advancement at the polls, and still, women's representation in legislative bodies is very poor. Currently, women make up 14% of the Members of Parliament in the Lok Sabha, with only 75 women out of 543. It is in the Rajya Sabha where women representatives occupy only 17% of the total seats. This clearly shows that there is little progression in transferring votes, which has been expressed by the people through the ballot to legislative seats. Grassroots activism has therefore come out as one of the vital means through which the political status of women can be boosted. According to Rai (2017), women politicians directly approach the female party activists by identifying them in public places like healthcare facilities and self-help groups.

In addition, the formation of self-help groups (SHGs) has played a great role in obtaining political mobilization. India currently has the largest number of women's SHGs across the globe, totalling over one hundred million under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission. This group have played a key role in raising political consciousness as well as the vote among women. However, systemic barriers persist. As per Yadav (2020), the traditional culture, family and structures are some of the barriers that still restrain women from engaging fully in politics. Moreover, Sanyal, Rao & Prabhakar (2019) also posits the fact that though women's groups have been very active in closing the political gender gap, the challenges in attaining equality are still very apparent. Therefore, despite the improvement in women's voting and the establishment of grassroots political parties in India, there is still a long way to change these barriers and achieve an equal representation of women in the legislative assemblies.

Theme 2: Centralized power and patriarchal narratives limit women's access to political leadership platforms

Today's India is witnessing the political centralization of power and dominance of patriarchal discourses, which have constrained women's ability to access political positions of power. The ascension of the BJP to power in India in 2014 has led to the furthering of processes to curtail democratic dissent. According to Paxton, Hughes & Barnes (2020), the government has very much restricted the sites of politics in civil society, which affects political competitors and NGOs. This is compounded by the fact that secularism is reducing in society. According to Chhachhi (2019), the process of secularization has therefore just led to the emergence of religious nationalism that intensified sectarianism and constructed a culture of patriarchy. This socio-political context ensures that women cannot engage fully in politics because the moment they try to transform the traditional gender roles of the society, they encounter harassment and resistance.

POLITICS

Women in Lok Sabha (%)	14.4
Women in Rajya Sabha (%)	10.5
India's rank among 193 UN members (Based on percentage of women in national Parliaments)	149
WOMEN IN STATE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLIES (%)	
India overall	9
Haryana, Bihar, Rajasthan	14
Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal	13
Punjab	5
% OF WOMEN MPS IN OTHER COUNTRIES	
Rwanda	61
South Africa	43
UK	32
US	24
Bangladesh	21

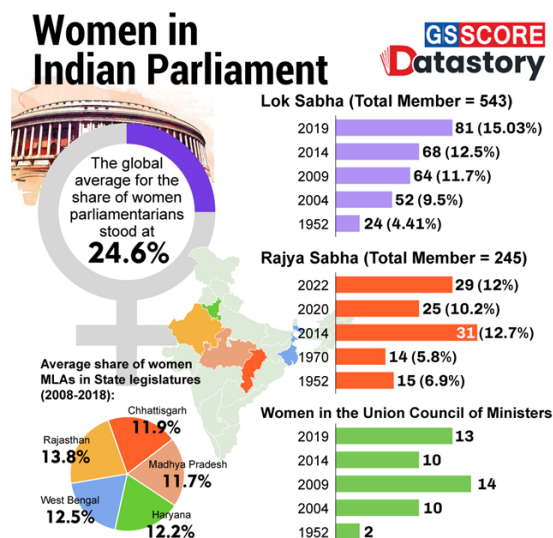
Source: PRS, MOSPI

Figure 4: Women in Politics in India with Respect to Other Countries. [Source: ET Bureau, 2020]

In the same way, Basu (2016) argued that despite the current democracy in India, it lacks adequate ways that ensure the protection of women's political rights. The absence of robust policy interventions and institutional support systems perpetuates gender disparities in political representation. For instance, half of the Indian voters are women, but the women's representation in the Lok Sabha is slightly over 14 percent, calling for a low representation in legislative assemblies. Therefore, in this rather grim context, political centralisation, the weakening of secularism, and patriarchal attitudes effectively restrain women from attaining political leadership positions. To counter these difficulties, fundamental shifts have to be made in order to decentralize the state, reverse the secularism trend, and accommodate the enhancement of female political participation.

Theme 3: Systemic barriers, including gendered violence and lack of support, deter women from politics

The contemporary political climate of India presents various barriers that act as barriers to women from engaging or continuing with politics. According to Krook (2017), gendered violence and lack of political support from the institutions are some of the factors that hinder women in politics. Sex based violence has remained one of the issues that have not been completely eliminated in society. Harassment and physical violence are some of the factors discouraging women from being promoted to leadership positions in politics, whether as newcomers or if they have already secured positions.



This is especially compounded by the fact that movement of persons within political parties is still rigidly regulated by institutional barriers. Krook (2017) affirms that political parties, while publicly supporting gender parity, often eliminate women from the process of candidate designation and leadership positions. It manifested in the 2019 general election, whereby women comprised only 9% of the total candidates, disregarding the deep-rooted cultures of patriarchy within parties. Despite the introduction of local governance gender quotas that have promoted women's representation in decision-making, Sinha et al. (2017) posit that this has not necessarily made women politically empowered. They found that despite having representation in 33% to 50% of the local bodies, women are mostly marginalized and given merely symbolic positions and are not active decision-makers.

Indeed, Sharma (2020) stated that societal demands and household chores infringe on the woman's ability to participate in the political sphere to the maximum. Lack of support and mentorship also detaches women more in politics and complicates their political careers. Eradicating these barriers calls for codified changes toward a better political climate for women in the United States. This entails preventing and prosecuting gendered violence, decentralizing political parties to enable women to be fairly represented and integrated, and supporting women so that they can meet both family and political responsibilities.

Theme 4: Inclusive policy reforms and gender quotas are essential for equitable political representation

In the current political context, there is a need to understand and enact or modify policies that would create a strong policy environment that promotes women's political engagement in the Indian political system. Biroli (2018) stated that one of them is the implementation and extension of the quota system at all levels of the government. The 74th Constitutional Amendment Act stipulated that 33 percent of the members have to be women in the local bodies, thus filling more places for women. However, Dey & Das (2020) noted that although there is a net increase in the proportion of women, women's participation is still symbolic, otherwise referred to as 'pseudo-participation,' whereby women occupy key positions but have no decision-making power. For this reason, the policies should provide the reservation with the support systems that will help women to gain the power to make the changes. Thus, there is a need to address the socio-economic factors that limit women from practicing politics. From the viewpoint of the author Mitra (2017), political entry depends upon individual, organisational and institutional factors. As such, financial contribution, mentorship, and leadership training will enable women to have all the support that they require to be active in politics.

As much as it is important to create a safer social environment, it is also equally important to establish a safer political environment. McDermott (2020) claim that the level of political violence decreases where there is increased gender equality. Measures such as strict enforcement of the law against harassment and violence against women within the political institutions can motivate women to become politically active. Another factor, as stated by Dey & Das (2020), that has been known to encourage women to fully participate is the encouragement of successful politicians. Some of the prominent women political leaders include Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Sonia Gandhi, who is a member of the Rajya Sabha and Nirmala Sitharaman, the Indian Finance Minister. Such representations can be useful in changing the perception society has towards such women and inspire women who intend to venture into politics (Goyal, 2020). Therefore, a comprehensive approach that includes legal changes, socio-economic help for women, strict safety measures, and the representation of appropriate female role models is crucial in forming an accommodating political climate in India for women in such a competitive environment.

6. ANALYSIS

Thus, the evaluation of study findings suggests that even though India has various policies and grassroots women's political committees, women are still left out of the political field, especially under the prevailing dismal political conditions. Autocratic leadership, militarism, and masculinized political discourses render women politically insignificant and socially powerless. According to the research, only 14.4% of seats in the Lok Sabha are occupied by women, and this is not a significant change from the last ten years. Following the research of Priebe (2017), Sonia Gandhi and Mamata Banerjee have both achieved leadership positions, but there is no certainty that they will be included systematically.

Local government reforms demonstrate that the representation of women in politics has improved over the years. However, Basu (2016) have also observed that most of the elected women are virtually powerless. Furthermore, Haldar

(2020) and Chacko (2020), it is obvious that other social pressures, no mentors in the political arena, and gender violence demotivate women to continue their political careers. Following the research of Rai (2017), this demotivation of women in politics is complemented by the party leaderships that still maintain a male-dominated practice, which hinders women from either being nominated or being given electoral tickets. In a politically volatile context where opposition to the authorities is severely cracked down, women are discriminated against twice, both politically and sexually (Kunar, 2017). This shows that these are systematic barriers that cannot be eradicated through mere quotas but require complete structural changes, cultural transformation and women's leadership ascendance at different tiers of governance.

Table 2 Seats Allotted to Women in Recent General Elections. [Source: Rai, 2017]

National Parties	2004		2009		2014	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
All India	355	45	556	59	668	61
Congress	45	12	43	23	57	4
BJP	30	10	44	13	37	28
Others	280	23	469	23	574	29

Source: Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

7. DISCUSSION

These results point to a harsh factual reality of India's grim political landscape characterized by a highly centralized polity, ideological polarization, and shrinking civil liberties, while women lobbying their way up into political decision-making positions have risen, they are still grossly underrepresented. Although India has seen great leaders like Indira Gandhi, Mamata Banerjee, and Sushma Swaraj, the same is not the case for most of the political system. As Sarkar (2016) and Rai (2017) have cited, despite the increase in women's grassroots political activism, historical barriers such as sexism, absence of political sponsorship and safety concerns act as barriers to leadership.

This is evidenced by Rai & Spary (2018), who noted that although women can be elected, they remain mere puppets of men, especially in local assemblies. Paul (2017) also finds that the present political environment in India does not allow dissent or any form of diversity, let alone women's politics. Also, Mitra (2017) concludes that the party has not done enough to have more women in leadership positions, with the major political parties failing to nominate women for winnable seats. These conclusions indicate that the current approach, which focuses mainly on the token policies, is insufficient. The status of women in politics can only remain symbolic without structural changes, cultural transformation, and increased compliance with the set quotas (Sahu & Yadav, 2018). The fact of the matter is that women's political rights are still more of a mirage in India rather than an achievement.

8. CONCLUSION

Therefore, the political landscape of the country, as depicted by centralism, masculine political discourses, and shrinking civil liberties, has remained unfavourable to women's effective participation in politics. These barriers include violence against women, which discourages women's political participation; political gatekeeping; and inadequate support structures. There are certain women who have attained political power, but it is rare to see many women occupying such positions. The study underscores the high time that calls for the improvement of the status of women through parliamentary reforms, policies, and structural transformation. In the absence of such interventions, the positive democratic development indicators that have characterized India may be overshadowed by the continued marginalization of women in leadership positions.

9. FUTURE SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The future research implications of this research include conducting similar studies with other states in India to identify variations in women's political participation and to assess the impact of state-level gender policies. Nonetheless, future studies can build on this understanding and examine some other layers of women's political participation, such as caste, religion, and class. Nevertheless, some limitations are there, such as the use of secondary data that may not give

recent data or may not include the perceptions of the minority group. The study is also limited by the dynamic nature of politics, which is always changing due to diverse factors. However, it also gives a basic premise for policymakers and scholars to demand more politically open frameworks in India.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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