



Women's Reservation in India: A Milestone for Gender Justice and Democratic Equality?

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ABSTRACT

India granted 33% reservation to women in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies, excluding the Rajya Sabha and state legislative councils, through the Constitution (Amendment) Act, 2023 (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2023). This achievement followed decades of political struggle and repeated failures to institutionalise gender justice in legislative bodies. The Women's Reservation Bill was first introduced in 1996 by the United Front Government led by Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda. Still, it collapsed amid disagreements among coalition partners and the subsequent dissolution of the Lok Sabha (Rai, 1999). Later, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee attempted twice—in 1998 and 1999—but was unable to secure passage. The United Progressive Alliance government under Dr Manmohan Singh also introduced the bill. Though it was approved in the Rajya Sabha, persistent differences among allies prevented its clearance in the Lok Sabha (Rajya Sabha Debates, 2010).

The breakthrough came in 2023 when the Modi government successfully steered the bill through both Houses of Parliament. Symbolically titled *Nari Shakti Vandana Abhiyan*—a salute to women—it signalled the government's commitment to ensuring one-third reservation for women in representative bodies (Lok Sabha Debates, 2023). However, the Act's implementation is conditional: it will come into force only after the 2026 census and the subsequent delimitation exercise. In this sense, the legislation has been compared to a "post-dated cheque," embodying both a historic milestone and a deferred promise. The lengthy and contentious trajectory of the bill highlights the complexities of coalition politics and the protracted struggle for women's political empowerment in India.

Keywords: 73rd Amendment Act, 74th Amendment Act, 128th Amendment Act, Delimitation, Gender Justice, Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, Panchayati Raj, Sarpanchapati, Women's Reservations

Introduction: The Long Struggle for Women's Reservation in India

Delivering his first speech in the new parliament building, Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed confidence and satisfaction at the historic passage of the Women's Reservation Bill through the 128th amendment to the Indian Constitution in 2023. He remarked that certain moments fill citizens with "excitement and hope" and urged members to enter the new parliament with renewed intentions, leaving behind past negatives. The bill's journey, however, was far from smooth, spanning decades of debate, disruption, and repeated failures before it eventually succeeded.

The earliest attempt occurred in 1996, when the United Front Government, under Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, introduced the 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill in the 11th Lok Sabha. However, disagreements among coalition partners and the dissolution of the House prevented its passage. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee twice attempted—first in 1998 with the 84th Amendment Bill and again in 1999 with the 85th—but both efforts were thwarted amid opposition and disorder (Rai, 1999). Later, the UPA government led by Dr Manmohan Singh introduced the 108th Amendment Bill in 2008. While it was approved in the Rajya Sabha in 2010 with an overwhelming majority of 186 to 1, the measure stalled in the Lok Sabha due to political divisions (Rajya Sabha Debates, 2010, Kavitha & Malleshan, 2022). It was only in 2023, under Modi's leadership, that the bill received approval in both Houses. The new law provides for 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies, and the Delhi Assembly. Still, it excludes the Rajya Sabha and state legislative councils (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2023).

Earlier, some progress had been made through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992, which mandated 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies. Certain states, like undivided Andhra Pradesh, went further and raised the quota to 50%. These reforms provided women with critical opportunities to participate in governance, transforming their roles from domestic caretakers to active administrators. Scholars note that local-level representation allowed women to demonstrate efficiency, dynamism, and leadership, often surprising critics who doubted their political capacity (Constitution (73rd & 74th Amendment) Acts, 1992; Mathew, 1994; Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2016). The demand for legislative representation was thus built on this experience of grassroots empowerment.

Globally, women's representation has been uneven. Countries like Rwanda (61.3%), Cuba (53.2%), Bolivia (53.1%), Mexico (48.2%), and Sweden (47.3%) rank among the highest, far ahead of India, where women accounted for just 14.4% of seats in 2019. Even Nepal (32.7%), Bangladesh (20.7%), and Pakistan (20.2%) fared better in terms of percentages (IPU Report, 2019). These statistics placed India at the 149th position worldwide. While such comparisons may be misleading—since women in Rwanda or Pakistan may not necessarily enjoy greater empowerment than their Indian counterparts—the figures nonetheless reveal India's persistent underrepresentation of women in national legislatures (IPU, 2019).

Since 1952, the presence of women in the Lok Sabha has remained disproportionately low. The first Lok Sabha had only 22 women (4.4%) out of 489 members. Over the decades, representation fluctuated: 27 women in the second Lok Sabha (5.7%), 34 in the third (6.7%), and 31 in the fourth (5.9%). The numbers even dropped to just 19 women in the sixth Lok Sabha (3.4%). Gradual progress followed, with 44 women in 1984 (8.1%) and 48 in 1999 (8.8%). The turning point came in the 15th Lok Sabha (2009–14), which had 59 women (10.9%), followed by 64 in the 16th (11.2%). The 17th Lok Sabha (2019–24) marked a record with 78 women, or 14.4% of total members (Election Commission of India, 2024). However, the 18th Lok Sabha, constituted in 2024, saw a slight decline to 74 women (13.6%).

These figures highlight the structural barriers women face in accessing political office, despite India's democratic credentials and its history of pioneering female leaders. The Women's Reservation Act of 2023, though deferred until after the 2026 census and subsequent delimitation, represents a milestone in addressing this imbalance. Its enactment underscores a decades-long struggle marked by political resistance, coalition pressures, and competing claims of sub-reservation for marginalised groups (Hasan, 2010; Singh, 2019). More importantly, it signals a step toward aligning India's representative democracy with its commitment to gender justice and equality.

A Democratic Turning Point in Women's Representation

A significant development is that this act has sparked a revolution. In six decades, the representation of women in India was abysmally poor, and in 2019, when the number of women reached the highest figure of 78, India's percentage did not exceed 14.4%. This makes gender parity a far-off goal. It had a debilitating effect on the Indian representational system.

Speaking before a women's conference in Sojitra village in Gujarat, Mahatma Gandhi emphatically declared, "as long as the women of India do not take part in public life, there can be no salvation for the country" (Gandhi, 1951–1994, CWMG). It was the inner conviction of the Father of the Nation. It took nearly a century for Narendra Modi's government to seek to institutionalise women's participation in public life by introducing the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, also known as the Salute to Women's Empowerment Bill. Currently, the number of women MPs is 74, and this will go up to a minimum of 180 when the new act comes into effect in 2029.

Apart from providing 33% reservation to women as a category, it reserves one-third seats for scheduled castes and tribes, though other backward classes are not given any quota. The reservation applies only to the Lok Sabha, not the Rajya Sabha or the state legislative councils. The act carries a sunset clause and will remain on the statute books for only fifteen years. After the expiry of this stipulated period, the parliament, by law, can review and renew it for another term of its choosing. The reserved seats will undergo a rotation process after the delimitation exercise is completed. However, it is a time-consuming process, and that is why the act is ironically referred to as a post-dated cheque.

The Delimitation Dilemma: A Post-dated Promise of Equality

The Women's Reservation Act of 2023 has been hailed as historic, yet it is premature to assume it has become operational. Scholars and critics alike liken it to a "post-dated cheque," dependent on the completion of a fresh delimitation exercise. Its design bears a close resemblance to the UPA government's 2010 version, which was passed in the Rajya Sabha but stalled in the Lok Sabha. The key difference is that the 2023 Act will only take

effect after the census and subsequent redrawing of constituencies. This is mandated under Article 170 of the Constitution and the Representation of the People Act, 1950, which together prescribe constituency adjustments in line with population changes. It also entails a revision of seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under Articles 330 and 332 (Basu, 2015).

India's Constitution requires delimitation after every census, and this exercise was undertaken four times until 1976. However, population-based delimitation has often generated controversy. One primary concern is the north-south divide. Northern states, with higher fertility rates and weaker enforcement of family planning, are projected to gain seats. In contrast, southern states, which have adhered more rigorously to population control, may lose representation. To prevent penalising the south, the 42nd Constitutional Amendment (1976) froze delimitation until 2001, and the 84th Amendment (2001) extended this freeze until 2026 (Kumar, 2023).

Consequently, the subsequent delimitation will be based on the 2026 census, conducted by the government elected in 2024. Only after census data is published and boundaries are redrawn will the Women's Reservation Act come into force, likely in 2029. Critics, however, fear that implementation will not be straightforward. Southern states may challenge the exercise if it results in a reduction of their parliamentary seats, potentially triggering political and legal disputes. The ruling party's justification that time is needed to "groom" women candidates is widely viewed as unconvincing. Indian women have already demonstrated leadership at the grassroots level through Panchayati Raj institutions, making such arguments appear patronising. Analysts argue the real reason for the delay lies in internal resistance. Sitting MPs, who have cultivated constituencies over decades, fear displacement once seats are reserved. As P. D. T. Achary, former Secretary-General of the Lok Sabha, observes, a sudden switch could leave many without a political platform to stand on (Achary, 2023). Thus, critics see the delay as tokenistic, undermining the transformative promise of the Act.

Despite criticism, the BJP frames the measure as part of its broader pro-women agenda. Over the past decade, it has rolled out a series of welfare schemes targeting women: the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (2016) provided subsidised LPG connections to 7.5 million households; Swachh Bharat promoted sanitation and dignity; Jal Jeevan Mission expanded access to clean water; Sukanya Samriddhi encouraged financial savings for girls; Beti Bachao-Beti Padhao emphasised education; and the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana supported maternal health. The Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Act, 2021, which raised the legal age of marriage for women to 21, further underscored this agenda. In addition, the current Modi cabinet includes eleven women ministers, the most significant representation since independence. In this light, the BJP views the Women's Reservation Act not only as a democratic milestone but also as a strategic step to consolidate support among female voters. Yet, until delimitation is completed, its promise remains deferred, fuelling scepticism about whether the Act is a genuine leap toward equality or a carefully timed political instrument.

Women as a Decisive Electoral Force

Over the past decade, women have emerged as a pivotal electoral constituency, compelling parties across the spectrum to frame policies and campaigns around their concerns. Prime Minister Modi and the BJP were among the first to capitalise on this dynamic. Still, soon other political formations recognised the importance of women voters and began tailoring their strategies accordingly. In the 2023 Karnataka Assembly election, the Congress achieved a resounding victory, mainly due to its strong appeal among women. Its promises of subsidised LPG cylinders at ₹500 and monthly cash transfers of ₹2000 struck a chord with female voters, who played a decisive role in the party's triumph. Similarly, regional parties such as the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi and Punjab, the DMK in Tamil Nadu, and the Janata Dal (United) in Bihar launched comparable welfare schemes designed to attract women voters. These competitive efforts underscored the electoral weight of women and increased the strategic importance of the Women's Reservation Act in the BJP's broader political calculus.

The BJP's loss in Karnataka further highlighted this reality. Having been outperformed by Congress on women-centric promises, the party quickly redoubled efforts to strengthen its appeal among women. Against this backdrop, political consensus began to crystallise around the Women's Reservation Bill. Although critics complained that the measure was postponed until after delimitation and failed to extend specific assurances to OBC women, almost all parties endorsed it. The near-unanimous passage of the bill in both Houses reflected its broad symbolic and strategic value.

Another notable dimension was the scramble among political parties to claim credit for the measure. The Congress, in particular, sought to assert ownership. Just days before the government tabled the bill, Sonia Gandhi urged its immediate introduction, reiterating the party's long-standing advocacy. At the Congress Working Committee meeting in Hyderabad, the leadership demanded the presentation and implementation of its proposals. When asked by the press, Sonia Gandhi reminded reporters that the UPA government had

introduced the bill and even succeeded in passing it in the Rajya Sabha in 2010. For Congress, therefore, the 2023 passage represented a delayed vindication of its earlier efforts.

This was not an isolated stance. In the run-up to the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections, Priyanka Gandhi had already advanced the demand for 40% reservation for women candidates, outflanking the BJP rhetorically. Regional parties also pressed for the revival of the 2010 bill. The Biju Janata Dal, the Bharat Rashtra Samithi in Telangana, and the Ajit Pawar faction of the NCP all voiced support, ensuring that momentum for women's reservation was sustained across the political spectrum. Thus, the Women's Reservation Act of 2023 emerged not only as a legislative milestone but also as the product of an evolving competitive politics, where women's growing electoral clout compelled every major party to acknowledge their centrality in India's democratic process.

Caste, Class, and the Quota Debate

The Women's Reservation Bill has had a long and turbulent journey, introduced repeatedly in Parliament during 1996, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2003, and 2008, only to face repeated roadblocks. The most vocal opposition came from identity-based parties such as the Samajwadi Party (SP), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), which argued that the bill, in its unmodified form, would disproportionately benefit elite, upper-caste women. Their concern was that without a sub-quota for Dalits, Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backwards Classes (OBCs), political representation would remain skewed, sidelining women from disadvantaged groups. These parties insisted that gender justice could not be separated from social justice. Unless provisions were made for Dalits, tribals, backward classes, and minorities, they argued, the bill would empower privileged women at the cost of marginalised sections. Over time, even the Congress party adopted a similar stance, demanding caste-based sub-quotas to ensure inclusivity. Sonia Gandhi herself has called for a caste census as a precondition for achieving complete justice, reasoning that only accurate data can determine fair representation for communities according to their demographic weight.

Several non-BJP parties, including the Janata Dal (United) and Congress in Telangana, have already undertaken caste surveys to quantify the strength of various backward groups. They argue that such surveys are vital not only for targeted welfare planning but also for justifying enhanced reservation quotas for historically deprived groups. The demand stems from the fact that India has not conducted a caste-based census since 1931, leaving OBC representation largely dependent on estimates rather than empirical data. Currently, OBCs enjoy 27% reservation in government jobs and educational institutions, but many contend that their actual proportion in the population is far higher. A caste survey, therefore, would provide the statistical foundation for revising quotas upward. Some experts suggest that an accurate count could justify raising OBC reservations to more than 51%. Indeed, the report examining the 1996 Women's Reservation Bill already recommended an OBC count to ensure equity. Similarly, the standing committee reviewing the 2008 Bill advised incorporating an OBC sub-quota to address fears of exclusion and guarantee that benefits did not accrue disproportionately to elite groups.

The renewed push for caste surveys also reflects a deeper political strategy. Non-BJP parties understand that caste data could fragment the BJP's core Hindutva constituency. The BJP has long sought to unify Hindus across caste lines under a common religious identity. However, a detailed caste survey could highlight disparities within Hindu society and embolden OBC groups to demand greater political and economic share, thereby undermining the BJP's integrative project. If OBCs perceive themselves as inadequately represented, they may align with caste-specific parties, fracturing Hindu unity and diluting the BJP's electoral base. Recognising this risk, the BJP has maintained a stance of ambivalence. While it has promised to conduct a caste census in 2026, it has simultaneously kept the issue in "cold storage," wary of the divisive potential of caste arithmetic.

The insistence by opposition parties on securing a sub-quota for OBC women within the Women's Reservation Bill must therefore be read not only as a call for social justice but also as a calculated electoral manoeuvre. By linking women's empowerment to caste justice, these parties hope to position themselves as defenders of marginalised communities and to outflank the BJP in future contests. For them, the bill is not merely about gender equality but about reshaping the reservation matrix to reflect caste realities. This intersection of caste, class, and gender highlights the complexity of India's democratic politics, where demands for inclusion often double as instruments of competitive electoral strategy.

Empowerment Through Representation: The Case for Quotas

Most critics argue in favour of women's reservation, as this is the only route to progressive empowerment and upward mobility of women. Female legislators are more likely to raise issues concerning their gender – whether it be equal rights, security, healthcare, or childcare. With a sharp rise in gender-based crimes, they can help a

lot in policy-making to check such crimes. The rising graph of gender-based violence is a challenge to social well-being, and steps are necessary to address it. The women, who are sufferers and victims of violence, must get a voice in decision-making to eradicate this menace. They must have a share in framing public policies concerning their sex. They must be a party to deliberations that have an impact on their future. Policy outcomes will be mere ideals if those about whom policies are framed have no hand in them.

Structural Barriers and the Limits of Tokenism

Reservations in India have not entirely served the purposes for which it was sought. In practice, it has served only as a palliative, not a panacea. A large number of women were granted a reservation, but their experience was anything but encouraging. They attended meetings, took part in debates and deliberations, but were unable to raise their issues freely. In various forums, there was stiff patriarchal resistance. It is thus a good step towards the holistic development of women, but it fell short of expectations owing to continued male resistance. In many Panchayats, the ladies Sarpanchas were accompanied by their husbands, who played a domineering role, and the females were reduced to being mere rubber stamps. They were variously addressed as Sarpanchapati or Parshadpati and acted as proxies for their wives. A lack of adequate literacy was a significant drawback, and they had to be content with being mere proxies.

One persistent limitation of women's political representation lies in the way candidates are selected. Political parties often prefer women from affluent, dominant caste families, sidelining ordinary women from marginalised backgrounds. This practice dilutes the transformative intent of the reservation, as elites disproportionately capture leadership opportunities. Another challenge stems from the system of rotating reserved seats. While rotation was designed to widen access, it has become a disincentive for many male politicians, who hesitate to invest in nurturing constituencies they may lose in the next cycle. Rotation thus produces a paradox: it broadens opportunities for new entrants but simultaneously weakens accountability, as incumbents may neglect long-term development. For these reasons, the Women's Reservation Act, though hailed as historic, carries inherent shortcomings. In practice, reservation can act as a shortcut to empowerment. Still, it also creates fractures within society, dividing groups seeking recognition of their identity from those demanding the redistribution of resources. This tension between recognition and redistribution remains unresolved, complicating the path toward genuine empowerment.

The politics of reservation in India have deep historical roots. During the last decades of colonial rule, Britain extended limited suffrage to Indians of high social standing, cultivating a loyal class of collaborators. This period also saw the rise of women's organisations, such as the Women's India Association (1917), the All India Women's Conference, and the National Council of Women in India. These groups initially fought for women's suffrage but gradually became involved in debates over the allocation of reserved seats for women in legislatures. Interestingly, since most were linked with the Indian National Congress, they largely opposed reservations for women. Their opposition reflected Congress's broader resistance to communal and sectional quotas, which the party believed fragmented the nation along lines of religion or caste, undermining national unity. Yet, in a historical irony, women's organisations that resisted reservation eventually saw it granted under the Government of India Act of 1935. As Lauva Dudley Jenkins observed, "ironically, although these major Indian women's organisations came down against such reservations, they were granted to them in 1935."

The colonial state had, by then, institutionalised separate electorates as part of its divide-and-rule policy. Muslims were granted a separate electorate in 1909, later extended to Sikhs, Christians, and Anglo-Indians in 1919 and 1935. Each new category reinforced social divisions and served to strengthen British authority by encouraging competition among communities. The Congress opposed such policies, fearing they would fracture the national movement. However, not all women agreed. Muslim women leaders such as Begum Shah Nawaz aligned with the Muslim League and supported reservations for Muslim women. When Congress boycotted the First Round Table Conference, Shah Nawaz, along with Mrs Subbarayan, presented a memorandum demanding women's reservations. They dismissed the popular liberal slogan "a fair field and no favour" as illusory in a deeply stratified society. Although criticised by most political parties and women's associations, their demand gained traction. Ultimately, the Government of India Act, 1935, allocated 41 reserved seats to women, embedding gender quotas within a framework shaped by both nationalist contestation and colonial manipulation.

As stated earlier, this is an act of far-reaching importance and consequence for the amelioration and political upliftment of women. In all likelihood, this act will prove to be a catalyst for creating a fabric of social dynamics that addresses the aspirational energy of young women in India today, while confronting the forces committed to maintaining the status quo and opposing social change. This may lead to redrawing the boundaries of battle lines resting on class, caste, sex, ethnicity, religion, and patriarchy. It will challenge all identities resting on these factors – whether assumed or real. It may help in hindering patriarchal dominance. Though the vested interests and their proxies may try to keep women under subjugation through the legislative process, saner

elements wedded to democracy and equality shall always stand by women in their struggle for securing gender justice. They have fought against imperialism, casteism, and communalism in the past and would not shirk to help women raise their status in politics through enhanced representation. This would ensure them a modicum of equality. It is only by reiterating their commitment to equality that they can create an inclusive society, free from the taint of gender imbalance and discrimination. The only way to incorporate diversity and inclusivity is by ensuring gender equality. This cannot be ensured by mere tokenism or paying lip service. It requires concrete legislative efforts, which this act provides. It will rectify the centuries-old sex imbalance.

The women of India have waged a continuous struggle to stave off divine negatives and narratives attached to their identity to keep them under perpetual patriarchal thralldom. They have woken up to the reality of attaining an equalitarian order, based on egalitarian values, and shall not rest until they succeed in their just endeavour and efforts. Their struggle has spanned over a century, and they need the power to speak on equal terms with their male counterparts. The constitutional amendment is only the first step in ensuring their participation in the legislature. More important than these is the mentality of men who still cannot stomach the concession granted to women. One must fight and eradicate this mentality that blocks women's urge for equality. Let no one forget that this is not a charity for women. Half of humanity is doled out only 33 per cent equality. The women of India might accept it as a first step, but their struggle for complete equality, which would require a 50 per cent representation, would continue. There are various kinds of structural as well as socio-economic factors that perpetuate sex inequality in the name of religion and ethnicity, and they create discriminatory and exclusionary features daily. It is these that have to be fought resolutely.

A constitutional amendment to raise women's representation to a reasonable extent of 33 per cent is, at best, only an enabling factor along the lines of affirmative action. As such, it is a welcome step and a good augury. One may hope that it will initiate sufficient dynamism to further the democratic process, thereby guaranteeing enhanced representation for women. One may hope that this will catalyse more meaningful social changes, aimed at establishing a society founded on complete equality between the sexes. This will ensure social justice and balance the two sexes in the matter of equality, enshrined in the Indian Constitution. For this, it needs to be followed up with other measures that will ensure greater involvement of those who are deprived and marginalised. The measure of success achieved in this act will depend on the pace at which contemporary society adopts the objectives embodied in the Indian Constitution and serves as a beacon for all concerned.

As of today, women in India are confronting the divisive and fundamentalist agenda of those fanatics who despise gender justice and are inimical to the notion of women's equality and emancipation. Various laws are seemingly innocuous, but their contents affect both sexes, such as the farm laws and the labour code. It is, therefore, only just and natural that in such matters, women's voice is not muzzled and they are given a chance in decision-making on issues relating to public policy. These laws have a direct impact on both sexes and therefore affect women as much as men. The pattern of growth discernible today hurts women. This would be obvious if one looks at the data concerning crime against women, which, despite stringent laws, is showing an upward trend. Cases of crime against immature girls are alarming. Women working with men in offices are very often made objects of gender discrimination.

India is often depicted, and rightly so, as a country with the fastest-growing economy. However, the combination of high GDP and sluggish job growth also affects women in the job market. Hence, it appears imperative that efforts be made to draw a large section of educated women into decision-making to explore new avenues of work. In a fast-growing economy, one has to go beyond the traditional stereotype of women's work and their role in society in terms of participation (Deshpande, 2022). An important aspect of gender justice is the increasing incidence of unpaid work for homemakers who also suffer from domestic violence. This poses a strong social challenge, which requires strengthening the democratic process and devices to overcome this menace. One must allow debate and deliberation to strategise on this critical aspect (Agarwal, 2021). Not all women represent women, but even so, steps must be taken to increase their participation in developmental matters that directly impact their lives. That is the only way to empower them to play a meaningful role in society and create an awareness of their importance. Their participation must be strengthened.

These caveats, if sincerely implemented, can change the entire gender scenario and usher in an egalitarian order. Their massive participation is a must for their growth. Merely associating divinity with women and likening them to Laxmi, Saraswati, or Bhawani will not do. There should be no difference between what people say and what they do. Let there be no mistake that despite high protestations, women continue to remain under-represented in politics and legislation and face hindrances in their onward march. Over the last two decades, numerous countries have introduced quotas in reservations to ensure greater participation, which is indeed heartening; however, this alone is insufficient. This is because, despite these quotas of greater representation, their participation in decision-making processes remains insufficient and inadequate. This under-representation is not unique to underdeveloped or developing countries. Even in highly developed

countries, a vast gap exists, an enormous chasm between males and females in terms of representation, governance, and decision-making. It must be acknowledged that women today are equal stakeholders with men in governing a nation, and hence, decision-making cannot remain the sole preserve of men. However, the stakeholders have equal rights in governance. India is a plural society, divided into ethnic and caste orientations, but there is one thing that is accepted by all, and that is the vast underrepresentation of women. They continue to be the most disadvantaged group, marginalised and excluded.

It may be added that only 16 per cent of the world's parliamentarians are women, and about forty countries have introduced gender quotas either through constitutional amendments or by changing election laws to make good this representational anomaly and deficit. Indeed, gender quotas are very discursive, and they are used to kick-start the process of quickly remedying the defects in the representational system. There is no shortage of countries that regard women's rights as human rights. In this context, the Beijing World Conference on Women can be seen as a pioneering platform that criticises "unequal power relations" and "discriminatory attitudes and practices", which have led to the under-representation of women in decision-making arenas. The conference stood for equal rights and equal participation. The Beijing Conference deemed the word 'quota' inadequate and suggested specific targets and implementation measures as alternatives. However, despite this semantic difference, the Beijing Platform for Action represents an effort to create an entirely new discourse. It puts the spotlight on the mechanics of exclusion carried on through institutional practices, which set an agenda for gender balance as a cherished goal to be achieved. For this, it exhorted the governments to commit themselves anew to affirmative action (UN, 1995; Krook, 2009).

There is an implicit belief that gender quotas have accelerated institutional democratisation and strengthened the process of including women in parliaments. The International Parliamentary Union aims to enhance and promote democracy by promoting the balanced participation of both genders in running political institutions (IPU, 2022). The Nordic countries, including Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, are recognised for their efforts to provide higher levels of representation for women through quotas. They aim to ensure women's representation and extended welfare measures through parliamentary action. It is interesting to note that, in these countries, there is no legal system of quotas; however, political parties provide quotas in practice to ensure greater political participation of women. That way, they try to create gender equity and balance (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005; Teigen, 2015).

The experience in South Asia is indeed encouraging and heartening, as it has produced an array of women leaders who have ruled their countries. They included Srimave Bandernayake of Sri Lanka, Indira Gandhi of India, and Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan. In India, reservations provide the easiest route to greater parliamentary participation and serve as an indicator of gender-based equality. It demonstrates how reservations can contribute to the empowerment of women in a traditional society dominated by men. India is a highly hierarchical and patriarchal society, and reservations have given women a new voice and a series of rights, which is indeed exemplary, laudable, and praiseworthy. That such a denouement is possible in a conservative social milieu raises the hackles of doubting Thomases. However, it also indicates that resolute action has the in-built capacity to promote affirmative action (Roy, 2018).

In India, the Women's Reservation Act centres around various political issues relating to constitutional equality and legislative freedom, but its real effectiveness is linked with the type of social order that a country has. The feminist debate on gender citizenship in the Scandinavian countries serves as a model for countries committed to providing greater representation for women. It has a profound impact on democracy and models of citizenship. The citizenship question in the Scandinavian countries is linked to their politics of inclusion, emerging within the framework of social movements that are central to historical changes rooted in affirmative action. India has indeed done well to emulate the Scandinavian countries to create a phalanx of rights for women. In the emerging scenario of India, Indian women are poised to stand equal to their male counterparts and seek solutions to their centuries-old problems of social justice and gender equality. Since equality is the cardinal principle of democracy around the world, male hegemony and domination act as impediments to progress, and they must be systematically set aside and removed to give birth to an egalitarian society, grounded in gender justice. This means a higher degree of emancipation for women, ensuring equality and equity in India. Male monopolisation of party politics is centuries old, and this structure based on injustice has to be systematically broken and brought down through constant efforts. State feminism is a form of politics that can be employed to mobilise women more effectively in a nation's parliamentary affairs, thereby offsetting the taint of inequality and injustice. There is a need to establish a set of values and benefits for women that align with the prevailing political landscape, ensuring better opportunities for women in political participation (Rai, 2017).

Conclusion

The debate around the Women's Reservation Act encapsulates the complex and layered realities of Indian democracy, where the struggle for representation has always intersected with caste, class, and patriarchy. The

Act, while long delayed, symbolises both progress and the unfinished nature of India's democratic project. It highlights the paradox of a nation that constitutionally guarantees equality but continues to be shaped by deeply entrenched social hierarchies and gender norms. Women's political participation, whether through reservations in Panchayati Raj institutions or prospective representation in legislatures, has already demonstrated the transformative potential of quotas. However, as history reveals, legal guarantees alone cannot dismantle patriarchal mindsets, economic exclusion, or the intersectional disadvantages faced by marginalised women.

The significance of the Women's Reservation Act lies not merely in securing seats for women but in reimagining democracy as more inclusive, participatory, and socially just. Quotas serve as a necessary trigger, but broader structural reforms in education, employment, and social norms must accompany them to achieve lasting impact. Experiences from both within India and globally affirm that increased women's representation reshapes policy priorities, expands democratic legitimacy, and challenges entrenched male dominance in political spaces. In this sense, the act is less an end in itself than a beginning. It represents a moral and political commitment to gender justice within a fractured society. By advancing women's voices in governance, India takes a decisive step toward realising the transformative promise of its Constitution—an egalitarian democracy rooted in both social justice and equal citizenship.

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