



## **WOMEN RESERVATION IN INDIA: REFLECTIONS ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN INDIAN POLITICS**

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**Abstract :** *This article examines the socio-political context that has necessitated the implementation of reservation policies for women's political representation in Indian politics. With an emphasis on the Women's Reservation Act of 2023 and its potential benefits for gender equality and the political empowerment of women, this paper also evaluates the effectiveness and challenges of women's reservation in addressing historical gender disparities in women's political representation. It highlights ongoing efforts to promote women's inclusion in governance and the need for comprehensive strategies to achieve gender parity in Indian politics.*

**Keywords:** *Women, Representation, Reservation, Participation, Indian Politics.*

### **I.Introduction:**

The landscape of Indian politics has long been marked by strides towards inclusivity, yet gender parity remains an elusive goal. The 73rd and 74th Amendments of 1993, introducing reserved seats for women in panchayats and municipalities, represented a pivotal step towards empowering women at the grassroots level. However, the absence of similar provisions at higher legislative echelons underscores a glaring disparity. Despite the constitutional provision for

reservation of seats based on caste demographics, the omission of such measures for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies has perpetuated a stark underrepresentation.

As of the 17th Lok Sabha, women constitute a mere 15% of its members, while their presence in state assemblies averages at a meager 9%. This disparity is not merely statistical but indicative of systemic barriers that hinder women's full participation in decision-making processes. Acknowledging these challenges, calls for



affirmative action have grown louder, with recommendations advocating for the reservation of at least 50% of seats for women across all levels of governance. Against this backdrop, exploring the necessity and implications of reserving seats for women in legislative bodies becomes imperative to foster a more equitable and representative democracy in India. The recent Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, proposing one-third reservation for women in these bodies, represents a significant step towards addressing this disparity. As India navigates the path towards gender equity in politics, understanding the challenges and opportunities ahead is crucial in shaping the future of its democratic institutions.

**II.Objectives of the Study:** The main objectives of the study are -

- a) To examine the historical background of women's participation in Indian politics.
- b) To analyze the key points of the Women Reservation Act, 2023.
- c) To discuss the need for and benefits of women's reservation in the political sphere.

### **III.Methodology:**

This study adopts a descriptive approach and relies solely on secondary sources of data, including articles, books, doctoral thesis, journals, government portals, parliament (constitutional assembly) debates, newspapers, and internet websites.

### **IV.Result and Discussion:**

**Historical Background:** The concept of reservations is not new; it dates to the Indian National Movement during the British colonial rule. The reservation system aimed primarily at addressing social justice issues.

In 1931, prominent women leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Mrs. Nawaz penned a letter to the British Prime Minister, expressing reservations about nomination, reservation of seats, and co-option in any sphere of activity, considering it a pernicious and humiliating system hindering real progress. Some upper-caste women and Gandhi opposed reservation. During India's national movement, women actively participated, but post-independence, their presence in the public sphere and political representation decreased. Even during the framing of the constitution, women members of the Constituent Assembly opposed women's reservation.

In 1975, the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) noted the decline in women's political representation. While most members of the committee were against reservations in legislative bodies, they all agreed on reserving seats for women in local bodies. However, Phulrenu Guha and Maniben Kara dissented, believing that reservations would weaken women's positions and primarily benefit upper-class and caste women. The National Perspective Plan of 1988-2000 suggested a 30% reservation for women in all elected bodies, but it wasn't clear if it meant



through nomination or election. Some state governments like Karnataka (1990), Maharashtra (1990), and Kerala (1991) implemented reservations ranging from 25% to 30% for women in local bodies, seen by many as political moves to gain advantage. Women's organizations and active female politicians supported these reservations. For instance, in July 1989, the Shetakari Sanghata fielded nine all-women panels in rural local bodies in Maharashtra, succeeding in seven places.

In 1992, the Indian Parliament passed the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution. These amendments, Articles 243D and 243T, require all state governments to reserve one-third of seats, including the chairperson's office, for women in local bodies. Within this 33%, seats are also reserved for SC/ST women. The amendments empower state legislatures to provide reservations for backward classes as well. Since Panchayat Raj is a state subject, many states have extended reservations up to 50% for women. States like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tripura, and Uttarakhand have implemented 50% reservations for women in local body elections.

The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women in 2001 highlighted the possibility of reservation for women in higher legislative bodies. In 2013, a committee formed by the Ministry of Women and Child Development recommended ensuring a minimum of 50% reservation of seats for women in various

governmental bodies. Despite these efforts, the 2015 Report on the Status of Women in India revealed a continued lack of adequate representation of women in state assemblies and Parliament. As a solution, it reiterated the need for reserving at least 50% of seats for women in local bodies, state legislative assemblies, Parliament, ministerial levels, and all decision-making bodies of the government.

The Women's Reservation Bill, aimed at achieving political representation for the women, has been introduced multiple times but has not been effective. Bills proposing to reserve seats for women in Parliament and state assemblies were introduced in 1996, 1998, 1999, and 2008. However, the first three Bills didn't pass due to changes in government. Although the 2008 Bill was passed by the Rajya Sabha, it failed to become law because the Lok Sabha dissolved. The 1996 Bill was examined by a group of MPs, while the 2008 Bill underwent a review by a parliamentary committee. Both groups supported the idea of reserving seats for women. Additionally, they recommended extending reservation to women from backward communities, implementing the reservation for a trial period of 15 years with subsequent review, and devising a plan to reserve seats for women in the Rajya Sabha and state councils.

Studies since the 1990s reveal that many women entering politics are from elite backgrounds, often controlled by male relatives who manipulate their positions. Women from lower castes face harassment



and intimidation, but interventions by NGOs have helped. Despite challenges, women's reservations in politics have led to positive changes, with women prioritizing issues like water supply, sanitation, and education over traditional concerns. Women-led villages have seen improvements like community toilets, smokeless stoves, and increased education opportunities. Panchayats in west Bengal have tackled issues like dowry, literacy and health campaigns, advocating for equal land rights.

#### **Need for Women's Reservation:**

In India, women have achieved a lot in different areas, but they still face challenges in political empowerment. The idea of empowering women hasn't made much progress since the national movements for independence. There is a need for special political actions to make sure women have equal representation in Indian politics because female representatives often feel left out. Many women politicians don't have much influence, while men mostly run the show in political parties. Measures like the Women Reservation Acts are important to break down barriers that stop women from having an equal say in Indian politics. Women reservation is needed to improve women's status in Indian society, especially in politics. Currently, women hold only about 15% of seats in both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, and progress has been slow since Independence. Many state assemblies have even fewer women members.

Increasing women's representation in politics is crucial for addressing issues like high rates of crimes against women, low workforce participation, poor nutrition levels, and skewed sex ratios. When more women are involved in decision-making, women's issues are better addressed in Parliament.

#### **Women's Reservation Act, 2023:**

The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2023, also known as the 'Narishakti Vandan Adhiniyam', introduced in Lok Sabha on September 19, 2023, mandates one-third reservation for women in India's lower house of parliament and state assemblies. It introduces new articles – 330A, 332A, 324A – in the Constitution to ensure the 33% reservation. The bill passed with overwhelming support, securing 454-2 votes in Lok Sabha and unanimous approval in Rajya Sabha, with 214 members in favor. Additionally, it includes a clause, setting a 15-year duration from the date of enactment.

#### **Key Provisions:**

- Inserted new articles: Articles 330A, 332A, and 334A to enhance women's representation in politics.
- One-third seats for Women: The Act mandates reservation of one-third seats for women in various legislative bodies, including the Legislative Assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, the House of the People (Lok Sabha), and the Legislative Assemblies of the States.



- Special provision: Article 239AA with respect to Delhi NCT.
- Horizontal reservation: Ensures representation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes women.
- Rotation of seats: Distribution among constituencies to promote broader participation.
- Sunset provision: Article 334A proposes the affirmative action policy for 15 years. However, it shall continue till such date as determined by a law made by parliament.

#### **Benefits of Women's Reservation:**

The Women's Reservation is a pivotal instrument in dismantling gender inequality and discrimination while crucially empowering women politically. By increasing the representation of women in both Parliament and State Assemblies, it not only advances gender equity but also fosters societal development by leveraging the leadership experiences of women in family life. Through their participation in governance, women bring valuable perspectives that contribute to impactful decision-making. For example, one study conducted in West Bengal in 2001, emphasized the positive impact of women's leadership, showing a focus on prioritizing investments in infrastructure that directly address the needs of rural women. Furthermore, the strategic nomination of women candidates from deprived and marginal communities not only offers an electoral advantage but also promotes diversity and inclusivity in the political

arena, thus further strengthening democratic processes and governance.

#### **Critique of the Act:**

While women's reservation has various benefits, there are also some disadvantages to consider. One concern is that it could reinforce gender stereotypes by implying that women need special treatment to succeed, rather than promoting equal opportunities based on merit alone. (Lok Sabha, 1947, July 18).

Concerns linger regarding the potential for women candidates to serve as proxies for politically influential husbands or relatives, thus raising worries about indirect control and manipulation within the political sphere. Moreover, the Act's linkage to the delimitation exercise prompts fears of substantial delays before the quota can take effect, particularly given the setbacks experienced in the 2021 census due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Amidst these challenges, there are increasing calls to extend the women's reservation to Other Backward Classes (OBCs), reflecting the recommendations of the Joint Parliamentary Committee dating back to 1996. However, the Act lack on specificity on the identification of reserved seats for women raises practical implementation concerns. Furthermore, addressing the rotation of constituencies poses its own set of challenges, as highlighted by a Ministry of Panchayati Raj study advocating for the discontinuation of rotation at the panchayat level, citing limitations on re-election opportunities for women, many of whom are first-time candidates. These multifaceted



issues underscore the complexities surrounding the effective implementation of gender quotas in political representation.

## **V.Conclusion:**

This study examines the dynamics of women's political representation in Indian legislatures, emphasizing the need for equal participation in governance. Despite constitutional equality, deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes have limited women's involvement, reflected in their underrepresentation in decision-making bodies. Historical and societal factors, including low literacy rates, discrimination, and gender-based violence, hinder women's political engagement. Addressing these challenges requires sustained efforts to

promote gender equity and inclusive decision-making processes. The Women's Reservation Act of 2023 marks a significant step towards achieving gender parity in Indian politics. While it has faced opposition and debates, its implementation could pave the way for greater empowerment of women and challenge entrenched patriarchal norms. However, its success will depend on effective design, implementation, and the commitment of political parties to uphold its principles without undermining its potential. Ultimately, increasing women's representation in politics is not just about numbers but about fostering inclusivity and ensuring that diverse voices are heard in decision-making processes.

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