

# Women Reservation Bill: A Bright Future with a Troubled History?

Ratan Kr Saha

SACT-I  
Harishchandrapur College

**Abstract-** The aim of the Women's Reservation Bill in India is to allocate one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women, with the goal of addressing historical underrepresentation. This bill aspires for a more inclusive and fair political landscape, taking inspiration from successful initiatives worldwide such as in Rwanda. Various challenges like societal norms and resistance from the past have an impact on the implementation of the bill and its potential to bring about transformation in India's political environment. The journey of the bill highlights the complex obstacles in tackling gender disparities in politics, underscoring the necessity of a holistic approach that goes beyond just meeting numerical quotas. The political environment surrounding the bill is shaped by evolving ideologies, regional factors, and party dynamics, which influence its progression across different administrations and parliamentary sessions.

## INTRODUCTION:

True democracy evolves on the basis of 'proper representation' and 'equal participation' of its 'demos'. Women represent almost half of the population of every country in the world, but, on average, their representation in parliaments is only 16%. (Sehta 2015) <sup>i</sup>The Women's Reservation Bill, a pivotal legislative initiative introduced in 1996 in India, stands as a crucial response to the persistent gender disparities within the country's political landscape. Rooted in the recognition of historical underrepresentation, the bill proposes a significant shift by advocating for the reservation of one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women. However, the recently passed Bill states that reserved seats shall be allotted by rotation after every delimitation exercise. This implies rotation approximately every 10 years as after 2026 delimitation is mandated to take place after every census <sup>ii</sup>(The wire, Sept. 2023) furthermore the passed bill laden with noble intentions, has embarked on a journey fraught with challenges and complexities.

## Background:

India, despite making strides in various spheres, continues to grapple with the glaring absence of women in decision-making positions. The historical context underscores a systemic imbalance that necessitated the formulation of the Women's Reservation Bill. This legislation aims not only to rectify the historical underrepresentation but also to address the broader societal implications of skewed gender ratios in political leadership. The significance of the Women's Reservation Bill extends beyond mere numerical adjustments in parliamentary composition. It delves into the very heart of governance, asserting that diverse perspectives are not only desirable but imperative for comprehensive policy formulation. The underrepresentation of women in politics has far-reaching consequences, influencing the nature of legislation, policy priorities, and the overall responsiveness of the political system to the needs of the entire population. In navigating the troubled waters of its legislative journey, the Women's Reservation Bill raises critical questions about the feasibility of its implementation and the transformative potential it holds for Indian politics. Infact according to Global Gender Gap Report 2021, India has declined on the political empowerment index by 13.5 percentage points, and a decline in the number of women ministers, from 23.1% in 2019 to 9.1% in 2021. ( Global Gender Gap Report 2021) <sup>iii</sup>It is acknowledged even by the government's Economic Surveys that women's representatives in Lok Sabha and the legislative assemblies are abysmally low

## History of the Bill:

The trajectory of the Women's Reservation Bill in India is emblematic of the intricate challenges embedded in addressing gender imbalances within political spheres. Since its inception in 1996, the bill has been a recurrent but elusive endeavor, designed to reserve one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women. Its tumultuous journey, marked by political resistance and strategic delays, underscores the deeply entrenched complexities inherent in attempting to recalibrate gender representation. It was former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi who in May 1989 first planted the seed of women reservation in elected bodies by introducing the Constitution Amendment Bill to provide one-third reservation for women in rural and urban local bodies. The Bill was passed in Lok Sabha but failed to get passed in Rajya Sabha in September 1989. In 1992 and 1993, then prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao reintroduced the Constitution Amendment Bills 72 and 73, which reserved one third (33%) of all seats

and chairperson posts for women in rural and urban local bodies. The Bills were passed by both the houses and became the law of the nation. Now there are nearly 15 lakh elected women representatives in panchayats and nagarpalikas across the country. September 12, 1996, then Deve Gowda-led United Front government for the first time introduced the 81st Constitution Amendment Bill in Lok Sabha for reservation of women in the Parliament. After the Bill failed to get approval in Lok Sabha, it was referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee chaired by Geeta Mukherjee. The Mukherjee committee presented its report in December 1996. However, the Bill lapsed with the dissolution of the Lok Sabha. Two years later, the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA government pushed the WRB Bill in the 12th Lok Sabha in 1998. However, this time too, the Bill failed to get support, and lapsed again. It was subsequently reintroduced in 1999, 2002 and 2003 under the Vajpayee government, but with no success. Five years later, the WRB bill again gained some traction during Manmohan Singh-led UPA government-1. In 2004, the government included it in its Common Minimum Programme and finally tabled it on 6 May 2008, this time in Rajya Sabha to prevent it from lapsing again. Five of the seven recommendations made by the 1996 Geeta Mukherjee Committee were included in this version of the Bill. The legislation was sent to the standing committee on May 9, 2008. The standing committee presented its report on December 17, 2009. It got the stamp of approval from the Union Cabinet in February 2010. (Mint, Sept. 2023)<sup>iv</sup> In fact, in March 2010, the upper house of parliament (Rajya Sabha) had passed a constitutional amendment to ensure women's reservation, but the legislation was eventually not taken up by the Lok Sabha.<sup>v</sup> And finally after twenty-seven years after [the women's reservation Bill](#) was first introduced in Parliament, the Lok Sabha on September 20 passed a Bill with near unanimity to amend the Constitution and provide one-third reservation to women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. (The Hindu Sept, 2023)<sup>vi</sup>

### Global Context:

The "Women in politics: 2023" map, created by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN Women, presents new data for women in executive positions and national parliaments as of 1 January 2023. Data show that women are underrepresented at all levels of decision-making worldwide and that achieving gender parity in political life is far off.

Women serve as Heads of State and/or Government in only 31 countries. Women make up 26.5 per cent of Members of Parliament. Globally, less than one in four Cabinet Ministers is a woman (22.8 per cent). New data show that women lead important human rights, gender equality, and social protection policy portfolios, while men dominate policy areas like defence and economy.<sup>vii</sup>

Similarly Women's equal participation and leadership in political and public life are crucial for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. However, women are underrepresented at all levels of decision-making worldwide, and achieving gender parity in political life is far off. As of September 15, 2023, there are 26 countries with 28 women serving as Heads of State and/or Government, with gender equality in the highest positions of power expected to take 130 years. Women represent 22.8% of Cabinet members heading Ministries, leading a policy area, with the five most commonly held portfolios being Women and gender equality, Family and children affairs, Social inclusion and development, Social protection and social security, and Indigenous and minority affairs. In national parliaments, women constitute only 26.5% of parliamentarians in single or lower houses, with only six countries having 50% or more women in parliament. At the current rate of progress, gender parity in national legislative bodies will not be achieved before 2063. Women hold 36% of parliamentary seats in Latin America and the Caribbean, 32% in Europe and Northern America, and 26% in sub-Saharan Africa. Data from 141 countries shows women make up 35.5% of elected members in local deliberative bodies, with regional variations observed in Central and Southern Asia (41%), Europe and Northern America (37%), Oceania (32%), Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (31%), Latin America and the Caribbean (27%), sub-Saharan Africa (25%), and Western Asia and Northern Africa (20%). (UN Women)<sup>viii</sup>

The global landscape surrounding women's reservation policies offers a nuanced perspective, marked by both accomplishments and persistent challenges. Striking a balance between progress and respecting cultural contexts becomes imperative to foster long-term acceptance. The global context also prompts a deeper evaluation of the effectiveness of women's reservation policies in addressing broader gender inequalities. While increased representation is a crucial step, the impact must extend beyond political spheres to challenge structural barriers and societal norms.

The global analysis of women's reservation policies offers a multifaceted perspective. Success stories underscore the potential for transformative change, while challenges and resistance underscore the need for careful navigation of cultural, social, and political dynamics. As India contemplates the Women's Reservation Bill, a critical and comprehensive approach, informed by global insights, becomes essential to navigate the complexities and promote meaningful gender inclusivity in political representation.

### Analysis:

Analyzing the potential benefits of the Women's Reservation Bill reveals multifaceted advantages that extend beyond numerical representation. Proponents argue that increased women's participation in politics can bring diverse perspectives to policymaking, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of societal issues. Research indicates that gender-diverse legislative bodies tend to prioritize social welfare policies, healthcare, and education, reflecting a broader

and more inclusive governance agenda. This shift in priorities aligns with the argument that women, having unique life experiences, can contribute distinct viewpoints to policy discussions. Moreover, enhanced representation is seen as a means to address and rectify historical gender imbalances, fostering a more equitable political landscape.

However, the Women's Reservation Bill encounters substantial challenges and criticisms. One major contention revolves around the concept of tokenism, wherein women might be perceived as placeholders rather than individuals elected based on merit. Critics argue that affirmative action based on gender might compromise the principle of meritocracy and potentially lead to the selection of unqualified candidates solely to meet quota requirements. This concern raises questions about the bill's effectiveness in promoting genuine empowerment and whether it might inadvertently reinforce stereotypes about women's capabilities.

Additionally, resistance to the bill often stems from deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and societal attitudes that resist changes to traditional power structures. The challenge lies not just in the passage of the bill but in overcoming resistance at the grassroots level, where traditional gender roles and expectations persist. Political parties, too, have been criticized for instrumentalizing women candidates solely to fulfill quotas without genuine commitment to their empowerment, undermining the transformative potential of the bill.

Furthermore, the Women's Reservation Bill faces challenges related to the intersectionality of gender with other social factors. Women from marginalized or minority backgrounds might experience compounded barriers, and the bill may not address these intersectional challenges adequately. As a result, the potential benefits of increased representation might not be evenly distributed among all women. While the Women's Reservation Bill holds the promise of addressing historical gender disparities and enriching political discourse, it faces challenges related to tokenism, resistance to change, and issues of intersectionality. A critical analysis requires not only recognizing the potential benefits but also interrogating the criticisms to arrive at a nuanced understanding of the bill's impact on gender equality in Indian politics.

The political dynamics influencing the Women's Reservation Bill in India are intricate and multifaceted. The bill's fate is deeply intertwined with the broader political landscape, where shifting ideologies, regional considerations, and party dynamics play pivotal roles. The ebb and flow of political will across different governments and parliamentary sessions contribute to the bill's protracted journey, with varying levels of support or opposition based on changing political contexts. Regional considerations, often tied to caste dynamics, further shape the trajectory of the bill as it navigates through the diverse socio-political fabric of the country. Additionally, strategic calculations by political parties, reflecting short-term electoral gains versus long-term gender inclusivity goals, contribute to the bill's complex political narrative.

The role of political parties is central to understanding the bill's dynamics. While some parties actively advocate for women's representation, perceiving it as a progressive policy, others may resist the bill due to concerns about internal dissent or fears of upsetting traditional power structures. Public opinion, shaped by factors such as education, urbanization, and cultural beliefs, further influences the positions of political parties. The media acts as a powerful intermediary, impacting public opinion by either emphasizing the importance of women's political representation or perpetuating gender stereotypes. The interplay between political parties and public sentiment forms a critical aspect of the bill's journey, requiring a nuanced analysis to comprehend the diverse factors shaping its fate within the dynamic political landscape of India.

### **A trouble history with bright future:**

The Women's Reservation Bill in the Indian context evokes a narrative characterized by the duality of a "Bright Future with a Troubled History." The promise of a brighter future emanates from the affirmative action policies embedded in the bill, which envisions a radical shift in gender representation within India's political landscape. The global successes of similar measures, exemplified by Rwanda, demonstrate the transformative potential of increased women's participation, suggesting that the bill extends beyond mere numerical targets to herald a more inclusive and equitable political domain.

However, this optimistic outlook is entangled with the troubled history that the Women's Reservation Bill has grappled with over the years. The bill's historical trajectory reveals a pattern of delays, political hesitancy, and societal resistance deeply rooted in cultural norms. This troubled history signifies the persistent challenges of navigating traditional power structures, resistance at the grassroots level, and concerns about tokenism. It raises pertinent questions about the bill's efficacy in fostering genuine empowerment and addressing the structural and attitudinal barriers that hinder gender equality in Indian politics.

A critical analysis of this juxtaposition underscores the imperative for a nuanced approach in understanding the bill's potential impact. The bright future envisioned by the Women's Reservation Bill necessitates a comprehensive strategy that transcends numerical quotas and addresses the multifaceted challenges ingrained in India's cultural and political fabric. Policymakers must grapple with the complexities of societal attitudes and historical resistance, recognizing that the bill's success hinges not only on its legislative passage but on its meaningful implementation and transformative influence on India's political culture. In navigating this theme within the context of the Women's Reservation Bill, it

becomes evident that the road to a brighter future demands a meticulous and inclusive approach that confronts the troubled history head-on.

The examination of successful cases such as Rwanda, Germany, Norway, and challenges faced by countries like France provided a nuanced understanding of the diverse approaches to gender quotas. The political dynamics, role of political parties, and public opinion emerged as crucial factors influencing the bill's fate. Lessons drawn from these case studies contribute to a more comprehensive perspective on the potential impact of the Women's Reservation Bill on gender equality in Indian politics.

Revisiting the thesis statement, the research aimed to critically analyze the Women's Reservation Bill, exploring both its promising future and troubled history. The findings underscore the transformative potential of affirmative action policies, while also highlighting the challenges rooted in societal attitudes, political dynamics, and the need for a comprehensive approach that goes beyond numerical targets.

### **Implications and recommendations:**

The potential impact of the Women's Reservation Bill on gender equality in politics is significant, with the capacity to address historical disparities and bring diverse perspectives to policymaking. However, the successful implementation hinges on overcoming challenges. Recommendations include fostering a robust political will across parties, emphasizing the importance of a comprehensive cultural shift in societal attitudes towards gender roles, and ensuring the bill's intersectional inclusivity.

To overcome challenges, India could draw inspiration from successful global models, integrating both voluntary and legally binding measures to accelerate progress. Political parties play a pivotal role, and recommendations include encouraging them to view the bill as an opportunity for holistic empowerment rather than a mere compliance requirement. Public awareness campaigns can counter resistance by highlighting the benefits of diverse representation. Ensuring successful implementation requires a careful consideration of regional variations and acknowledging the intersectionality of challenges faced by women from marginalized backgrounds. Inclusive policies addressing these nuances can mitigate potential pitfalls. Moreover, sustained efforts to challenge traditional power structures and promote a cultural shift towards gender equality are essential for the bill's long-term success.

The Women's Reservation Bill holds immense potential for fostering gender equality in Indian politics. By learning from global experiences, addressing challenges proactively, and advocating for a comprehensive cultural shift, India can pave the way for a more inclusive and representative political landscape. The recommendations outlined aim to guide policymakers towards effective implementation, maximizing the positive impact of the bill on gender equality.

### **REFERENCES:**

1. WOMEN'S RESERVATION BILL Bharti Sehta The Indian Journal of Political Science Vol. 76, No. 2 (April - June, 2015), pp. 205-208 (4 pages)
2. Retrived from <https://thewire.in/government/womens-reservation-bill-the-issues-to-consider>
3. [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf) page 27 )
4. Retrived from <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/whats-the-womens-reservation-bill-its-history-and-who-brought-it-first-11695068266469.html>
5. ( <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ISAS-Brief-1067.pdf> page ,1)
6. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/lok-sabha-passes-womens-reservation-bill/article67327458.ece>
7. Retrived from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/03/women-in-politics-map-2023>
8. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures>