

## The Revival of Women's Question in India's Political Landscape

Chayanika Uniyal, University of Delhi, India

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### Abstract

This paper examines the resurgence of the “women's question” in Indian politics, following its development from colonial times to the present. In the past, women's struggles throughout the colonial era were mostly centered on social changes, with little attention paid to political emancipation. Despite legislative advancements, women in the post-colonial era were marginalized in politics and had insufficient representation in decision-making. The study looks at significant turning points that rekindled the debate in India over women's empowerment. The ratification of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which set aside seats for women in local government bodies and gave them a forum for grassroots political engagement, was one such instance. Even though Parliament has passed the Women's Reservation Bill in 2023, which calls for women to hold 33% of the seats in Parliament and state legislatures, but the main problem with the bill is how it will be implemented, which will ultimately determine the course of the intended outcomes for increased women's participation in democratic processes. The study also delves into assessing the role of government affirmative action programs and their effects. The study comes to the conclusion that both historical movements and current discussions are fueling the continued resurgence of women's question. These initiatives are a reflection of the ongoing fight for women's empowerment and gender equality in India's changing political environment.

*Keywords:* women, NPP, women reservation, Indian politic

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## Introduction

The question of women's political representation in India has a long and layered history. It returned to national discourse recently, prompting a revisit of key historical moments. Notably, during the Second Round Table Conference on 17 September 1931, Mahatma Gandhi, when asked by Mrs. M.R. Subbarayan whether he would support co-opting women into the legislature if none were elected, made a firm and powerful declaration: "I shall boycott any legislature which does not have a fair share of women members" (Gandhi, 1931). His words highlighted the Congress's early commitment to inclusive governance and Gandhi's firm belief in gender equality as a foundational principle for India's constitutional and political future.

After Independence, the Constitution of India granted women formal recognition as equal citizens and guaranteed them Fundamental Rights. This constitutional commitment fostered the belief that legal equality would naturally translate into substantive equality in political life. It was assumed that the historical factors responsible for women's subjugation over centuries would be adequately addressed through these constitutional provisions, thereby ensuring their freedom, development, and empowerment. During the nationalist struggle, it was widely believed that women's upliftment would follow as a natural consequence of the nation's liberation.

However, these assumptions did not fully materialize. Even after seventy-seven years of independence, the extent and level of women's participation in politics remain markedly low. Women continue to be significantly underrepresented in both Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies. The constitutional guarantee of equal rights has not been translated into meaningful representation in practice. This is evident from the fact that women's presence in the Lok Sabha has risen only marginally from a mere 5% in the First Lok Sabha (PRS Legislative Research, n.d.) to just 13.6% in the current 18th Lok Sabha (Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs, n.d.), highlighting the persistent gap between constitutional ideals and political reality.

## Historical Background

The women's question first emerged in India during the 19th century when the Indian Press began, the question of women has also become one of the major issues in social debate. At first, it was among social reformers. Then it became part of discussion among the nationalist leaders. Finally, after independence, among all those who were in decision making. Initially, the women's question emerged among the newly educated middle class as part of an identity crisis triggered by colonial education. By the late 19th century, it became connected to cultural nationalism and revivalism. It served as a response to the increasing Western influence, especially among educated young people. Uma Chakravarti sees this change as a spontaneous transition from the old patriarchy to the new patriarchy (Chakravarti, 1998). In early 20th-century India, educational reforms led to the emergence of the "new woman." She was educated, aware, and more active in public, political, and social life outside the home. Further period of time, the women's question began to get strong voice within the Indian national freedom movement.

In early 20th-century nationalist discourse, women's emancipation was closely tied to the broader struggle for national freedom. Movements like the Swadeshi (1905–08) and the Home Rule League (1916–18), led by Lokmanya Tilak and Annie Besant, created new

opportunities for women to engage in public life. Besant, a prominent supporter of Indian self-rule, became the first woman president of the Indian National Congress in 1917 (Sitaramayya, 2009). This period also saw the rise of a women's group, the Women's India Association (WIA), in 1917. In the following years, two more important women's organizations came about: the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) in 1925 and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1927. This was signaling a turning point in the organized women's movement in India. On December 15, 1917, the demand for women's suffrage in India gained momentum, when Sarojini Naidu headed an All-India delegation to Edwin Montagu and Lord Chelmsford, seeking equal voting rights for women (Forbes, 1979). In 1918, the Indian National Congress, at a special Bombay session with 5,000 delegates, passed a resolution in support with a 75% majority. Later that year, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani introduced a similar resolution at the 33rd Congress session, which was passed unanimously (Indian National Congress, 1918). Despite a strong demand for voting rights, the Government of India Act, 1919, denied women suffrage.

Except during the Gandhian era, the women's question in India largely focused on education, legal reforms, and familial roles, rather than political participation. A significant shift occurred during the Non-Cooperation Movement in the 1920s, when Gandhian feminism began to take shape. This evolved into a mass-level movement in the 1930s with the Civil Disobedience Movement, which witnessed the entry of thousands of women into political activism. In 1925, Sarojini Naidu made history as the first Indian woman to serve as President of the Indian National Congress (Sitaramayya, 2009), a milestone made possible through Gandhi's support. Notably, this occurred at a time when women in supposedly progressive parties like the British Labour Party and the American Democratic Party still lacked the right to lead, despite their countries being regarded as champions of democracy. Later, in 1928, despite the Congress boycott, some women leaders approached the Simon Commission, demanding female suffrage and the reservation of four seats for women in legislatures (Forbes, 1979). While the Commission rejected reservations, it allowed provinces to nominate women if none were elected. Despite this again in 1933, Nellie Sengupta became the third woman and second non-Indian to serve as President of the Indian National Congress (Sitaramayya, 2009). Thus, Gandhi played a pivotal role in awakening women's political consciousness, encouraging them to participate equally in the freedom struggle and within the Congress party.

The question of women's quota in representative institutions has also been a subject of debate in India since the British era. Importantly, the WIA, NCWI, and AIWC collectively drafted a memorandum advocating for adult suffrage, including for women, but rejected the idea of women reservation in legislatures. This memorandum was submitted to the British Parliament in 1931. It inspired the Indian National Congress to adopt the Fundamental Rights Resolution at its Karachi Session in 1931 (Forbes, 1979). In a 1932 report, The Indian Franchise Committee, led by Lord Lothian, recommended reserving 2% to 5% of seats in provincial legislatures for women for a period of ten years. This suggestion came despite the rejection of the idea of women's reservation by women's organizations. The committee acknowledged that, despite a growing female electorate, deep-seated societal prejudice would likely prevent women from getting elected without such special provisions (Indian Franchise Committee, 1932). The first formal provision for women's political representation appeared in the Government of India Act of 1935, which introduced a quota system allowing for one woman for every five men. Under this provision, 41 seats were reserved for women in the provincial legislatures, and limited reservations were also extended to the central legislature (Government of India Act, 1935). As a result of this efforts, 10 women won seats from

general constituencies, while 41 secured positions through reserved constituencies in 1937 elections (Desai & Thakkar, 2001). This marked an important, though modest, step toward institutionalizing women's political participation during the colonial period.

### **Ideals of Equality and the Gender Paradox in Constitution-Making**

Despite the Constitution's progressive vision of equality, the Constituent Assembly debates reflected a paradox on women's political representation. While drawing from the Government of India Act, 1935, the Assembly excluded its provision for reserved seats for women. Members like Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Sarojini Naidu, Hansa Mehta opposed women's reservations, who advocated broader socio-economic justice over quotas (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1946). Their principled opposition to reservations, however, was shaped as much by idealism as by a misplaced belief in male goodwill and Gandhian moral consensus. Renuka Ray, however, cautioned that reservations might further marginalize women by restricting them to reserved seats and excluding them from general constituencies (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1947).

The debates also exposed deep-seated patriarchal views among many male members. H.V. Kamath, for example, questioned women's suitability for politics by invoking gender stereotypes, suggesting that women were driven more by emotion than the rationality he believed politics demanded. (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1949a). While some members like Durgabai and Purnima Banerji attempted to contest this marginalization, when they asked vacated seats of women members should be filled by women only. Unfortunately, the broader assembly remained unwilling to institutionalize women's participation (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1949b). But Nehru recognized the issue. In a letter to the Chief Ministers dated January 4, 1950, he urged them to increase women's representation, but his appeal went largely unheeded (Parthasarathi, 1985). In his February 3, 1950 speech in Parliament, Nehru admitted women hadn't received a fair deal, yet dismissed the issue as a "relatively small matter" outside government policy (Parliament Digital Library, 1950).

So here is an interesting question, when Jawaharlal Nehru believed that women should have had greater representation in the legislature and there is a huge gender gap, why he didn't try for any policy based affirmative actions? I have two prospective answers for this. First- With the adoption of the Constitution, Indian women secured the principle of equality. They were granted fundamental rights, including access to education, the voting right, and the freedom to pursue any profession, including public service and political office. So, he may assume that this equality will gradually increase women's political representation. Second- during this time there was a major legislative effort to institutionalize gender equality came in the form of the Hindu Code Bill. Spearheaded by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the then Law Minister, the Bill aimed to amend Hindu personal laws to ensure women had equal rights in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and property. Ambedkar viewed the Bill as central to building a modern, progressive, and egalitarian India and Nehru was enthusiastic to pass this law. But the Bill faced fierce resistance from conservative sections of society and within the Constituent Assembly itself. Despite Jawaharlal Nehru's strong political backing and commitment to the Bill's ideals, its comprehensive version could not be passed in one go. After Ambedkar resigned in protest in 1951 over the delay and dilution of the Bill, its provisions were later introduced piecemeal through separate legislations like the Hindu Marriage Act (1955), Hindu Succession Act (1956), and others. This experience led Nehru to reflect on the limitations of his government. If it was not yet prepared to implement broader socio-

economic reforms, it was even less likely to be ready to translate the idea of political affirmative action for women into concrete policy.

This reluctance contributed to the absence of serious debate on women's reservations in the Constituent Assembly. Thus, deferred the gender question under the guise of egalitarian rhetoric, ultimately sidelining structural reforms essential for women's empowerment in the political sphere. During this time, many women's organizations that had actively fought for rights during the national movement also shifted their focus. With increased dependence on state funding and grants, they transitioned into welfare service providers rather than pressure groups or reformist platforms. Consequently, the "women's question" slowly disappeared from the mainstream political discourse in the early post-independence period. It wasn't until 1988 that the issue resurfaced, this time as part of the Government's National Perspective Plan for Women, which once again revived the call for women's active political participation.

### **Rajiv Gandhi's Feminist Turn: Renewing the Debate on Gender and Inclusive Politics**

In the 1970s and 1980s, women in protest movements began addressing gender-based injustices, shifting from collective resistance to challenging internal patriarchy. Globally, momentum came through the UN's 1975 Mexico City Conference, the UN Decade for Women (1975–1985), and CEDAW (1979) (United Nations, 1979), all urging state-led gender reforms. Responding to these developments, India set up the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) in 1972, with Veena Majumdar as Member Secretary. The CSWI assessed women's status after independence and revived the debate on political reservations, exposing systemic exclusion and the need for affirmative action—thus marking a renewed and more critical phase in India's discourse on women's political representation.

The rising tide of grassroots mobilization was flowing as Rajiv Gandhi took office in 1984 after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and made women's empowerment a key part of his vision for a modern India. He identified women as a vital yet long-neglected political constituency and sought to address their marginalization in public life. Notably, some states had already taken pioneering steps; Karnataka introduced 25% reservation for women in Mandal Panchayats in 1985, while Andhra Pradesh followed in 1986 with 20–25% reservation in Gram Panchayats, including co-opted positions in Panchayat Samitis (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2008). Building on these efforts, Rajiv Gandhi's government revisited the recommendations of the 1974 Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI), especially Chapter VII, Section IV of its *Towards Equality* report, which had strongly advocated for reserved seats to enhance women's representation in grassroots political institutions (Ministry of Culture, Government of India, 1974). In response, the Rajiv Gandhi government introduced the National Perspective Plan (NPP) for Women in 1988, a 14-member Core Group, headed by Smt Margaret Alva, the then Minister of State for Women, Youth Affairs, and Sports. The initial draft of the NPP clearly acknowledged the problem of women's political underrepresentation and 30% reservation was proposed for women in all elected bodies, from Panchayats to Parliament (Government of India, Department of Women & Child Development, 1988). However, due to strong resistance, especially against reservations at higher levels, the government adopted a phased approach. Following consultations with women's groups and political parties, it prioritized implementing reservations at the local (Panchayati Raj) level, aiming to extend them to state and national legislatures once women gained electoral experience. In 1989, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi

strongly advocated for women's political inclusion in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs<sup>1</sup>). In speeches on January 27 (Gandhi, 1991a) and May 5 (Gandhi, 1991b), he highlighted the severe underrepresentation of women and proposed a 30% reservation for them at all levels of PRIs. Introducing the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill in the Lok Sabha, he justified the move by noting that women constitute half the population, play a key role in rural economic life, manage household finances, and preserve India's cultural heritage (Gandhi, 1991c). However, despite his efforts, the 64th and 65th Amendment Bills failed to pass in the Rajya Sabha due to lack of majority support (Rajya Sabha Secretariat, 1989).

By the 1990s, the women's movement in India had begun engaging more directly with the state. Women's groups were increasingly consulted on welfare issues, which eventually paved the way for the formation of the National Commission for Women in 1992, marking a shift toward institutionalized gender advocacy. A significant result occurred when the vision of the late Mr. Rajiv Gandhi for decentralizing power was continued by the then Prime Minister Mr. Narsimha Rao and the INC Government. This took shape through the 73rd constitutional amendment on April 24, 1993, which introduced a one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies across the country. This was marking a transformative intervention in Indian democracy (The Constitution Seventy-Third Amendment Act, 1992). These amendments not only decentralized governance but also institutionalized women's participation in political decision-making at the grassroots level. In the first elections under this new system, nearly one million women were elected, shattering the myth of their political disinterest. This decisive reform energized women's groups nationwide to campaign for extending similar reservations to state legislatures and Parliament. Rajiv Gandhi's foresight and political will fundamentally shifted the discourse around women's political empowerment, making gender a central axis of democratic reform, more inclusive and representative political environment. However, the full realization of this vision has faced resistance in a patriarchal society that continues to speak of gender equality more in rhetoric than in practice.

### **Women's Political Reservation at the Grassroots: Opening Doors or Hitting a Wall?**

Three decades later, more than 1.45 million women hold positions in local decision-making bodies across India, marking a significant transformation in rural political participation (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, n.d.). However, this grassroots advancement stood in stark contrast to the reality at the national level. Despite notable gains at the grassroots through Panchayati Raj reservations, women's representation at the state and national levels remains disproportionately low. In the 2019 Lok Sabha, women made up 14.4% of the members (PRS Legislative Research, n.d.), but this declined to 13.6% in the 2024 elections (Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs, n.d.). In the current Union Cabinet, only 7 women ministers have been inducted, reflecting persistent gender gaps in executive leadership. At the state level, Nagaland elected its first woman MLA in 2023. This was decades after it gained full statehood in 1963, even though it had relatively good social indicators. (India Today Web Desk, 2023). Mizoram, too, elected more than one woman MLA for the first time in 2023 and before that has had only four women MLAs since its formation in 1972 (The Hindu, 2023).

Since Independence, India's top political leadership has remained overwhelmingly male-dominated. Out of 15 Presidents, only two have been women, and among 14 Prime Ministers,

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<sup>1</sup> PRIs refers to gram panchayats (village-level councils), panchayat samitis (block-level councils), and zilla parishads (district-level councils).

only Indira Gandhi has held the office as a woman. Similarly, while India has had 18 women Chief Ministers, the figure remains minuscule when viewed against the backdrop of 28 States and 8 Union Territories, and the hundreds of male CMs since 1947. To date, only 12 States and one Union Territory have ever had a woman serve as Chief Minister (Mishra, 2024). Even parties with a historical commitment to inclusion like the Congress, which appointed the first woman CM, Sucheta Kripalani, in 1963, have had only five women CMs, with the BJP has same and the rest from regional parties. This reveals a clear disconnect: while grassroots reservations have opened doors, the absence of similar mechanisms at higher levels has created a structural ceiling. Without granting reservations to state legislatures and Parliament through the long-awaited Women's Reservation Bill, the progress at the local level may stagnate. This could prevent true and lasting gender equality in Indian politics.

### **Towards Equitable Representation in State and National Legislatures**

The 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill was introduced in 1996 by then Prime Minister Mr. Deve Gowda-led United Front government, proposing 33% reservation for women in Parliament and State Assemblies. Yet, when the bill was taken up on 12 September 1996, what was meant to be a brief 10-minute discussion quickly turned into a contentious and prolonged debate. Some male MPs questioned whether enough “capable women” could be found to fill the seats, while others criticized the bill for failing to include sub-quotas for women from backward caste communities. A Joint Parliamentary Committee urged the bill's immediate implementation, with a 15-year time frame for review (Ministry of Law and Justice, 1996). Despite this, the bill failed to pass and lapsed. It was reintroduced several times by the government led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, from 1998 to 2003, but each time it faced the same fate. It was repeatedly blocked, showing strong political resistance to women's full and equal participation in legislative power.

Five years after the initial push, the Women's Reservation Bill (WRB) gained momentum under the Manmohan Singh-led UPA-I government. UPA Chairperson Smt. Sonia Gandhi also remained a consistent and vocal advocate for the legislation. In 2004, during the UPA government the WRB was included in its Common Minimum Programme (United Progressive Alliance, 2004). On May 6, 2008, the bill was introduced in the Rajya Sabha. This version incorporated five of the seven key recommendations of the Geeta Mukherjee Committee (1996). The bill was sent to the Standing Committee on May 9, 2008, which submitted its report on December 17, 2009. It received Union Cabinet approval in February 2010 (Madhavan, 2010) and was passed with an overwhelming majority in the Rajya Sabha on March 9, 2010 (186 in favour, 1 against) (The Guardian, 2010). Smt. Sonia Gandhi's commitment to the bill remained steadfast even after the UPA's tenure. On September 20, 2017, she wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, urging him to take action on the bill. Reaffirming the Congress Party's full support, she stated: “I am writing to request you to take advantage of your majority in the Lok Sabha to now get the WRB passed in the Lower House as well” (Indian National Congress [@INCIndia], 2017). Despite this renewed push, the bill was not tabled in the Lok Sabha, and eventually lapsed.

On September 20, 2023, 27 years after it was first introduced, the Narendra Modi-led NDA government successfully steered the WRB through Parliament. With support of Congress and other opposition parties the vote was nearly unanimous, with only two opposing votes. This bill guarantees one-third of seats for women in Parliament and State legislatures. At the time of its passage, women held just 13.6% of Lok Sabha seats, below the global average of 26.5% and the regional average of 19%. In state assemblies, representation varied: Chhattisgarh had

18% women MLAs, while Himachal Pradesh had one, and Mizoram had none (UN Women, 2023). Although the WRB is a historic milestone, but its delayed implementation remains a significant shortcoming. According to the bill, the reservation will only come into effect after the next population census and subsequent delimitation exercise, a process that could take several years, with no clear timeline.

Women leaders from opposition parties raised their voice on the shortcoming. Smt. Sonia Gandhi, speaking for the Congress in Parliament, welcomed the Bill but strongly opposed the delay in its implementation. She questioned, “Indian women have waited 13 years, now how many more? Two, four, six, eight?” The bill’s delay clause, she warned, threatens to change a moment of progress into a time of postponed justice. She demanded the bill’s immediate enforcement and inclusion of SC, ST, and OBC women. Kanimozhi Karunanidhi strongly criticized the delay clause in the Bill. She pointed out that even though Parliament passes about forty bills each year, it still has not reflected women’s voices. She noted that India ranks 141 out of 193 countries in women’s representation, behind Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. During the debate, Supriya Sule raised concerns over the uncertainty surrounding the implementation timeline of the WRB. She pointed out that since both the census and delimitation have no fixed dates, the bill’s enforcement remains indefinite. Questioning the government’s intent, she asked, “How are we going to get it?” Sule powerfully summed up the situation by quoting Mahatma Gandhi’s remark on the Cripps Mission, calling the bill “a post-dated cheque drawn on a crashing bank” (Lok Sabha, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

The resurgence of the “women's question” in Indian politics signifies a critical moment in the ongoing discourse on gender and democracy. While women have historically played vital roles in India’s socio-political movements, their representation within formal political institutions has remained limited and often symbolic. The recent revival of debates surrounding the Women’s Reservation Bill and broader gender-related policy reforms marks a renewed commitment to addressing entrenched structural inequalities.

Yet, the discourse must move beyond numerical representation to encompass substantive participation. Ongoing issues like gender-based violence, limited access to education and healthcare, wage gaps, and the marginalization of Dalit, Adivasi, and minority women show the need for a more inclusive political agenda. The visibility of women in grassroots democratic institutions, particularly through Panchayati Raj, has begun to challenge patriarchal norms and offers an alternative model of participatory governance.

Thus, the revival of the women's question must not focus only on legislative quotas. It should spark a wider change in political culture. This change should reimagine leadership, policymaking, and governance through a gender-equitable lens. In this context, the women’s question is not merely about inclusion, but about the democratization and feminization of the political sphere itself.

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**Contact email:** [dr.chayanika@gmail.com](mailto:dr.chayanika@gmail.com)