

## Political Empowerment of Women in India: Understanding the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam

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### Abstract

*The Indian freedom struggle was historic in the sense that it led to the beginning of women's participation in public affairs. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, inspired a large number of women to participate in the struggle for political independence. Gandhi's deep faith in equal mental competence of women with that of men encouraged them to come forward and participate in the freedom movement. However, women occupied less than 5% of the total Lok Sabha (Lower House) seat in the first general election soon after independence which was not encouraging considering their participation in the freedom struggle. Therefore, the question of women representation remains one of the most debated issues in Indian politics which resonates in the contemporary period also. In this context, this article attempts to understand the history of women's political representation and tries to address the question of women reservation in Indian politics considering the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam passed in 2023.*

**Keywords:** Women, Political Empowerment, Reservation, Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam

### INTRODUCTION

Political empowerment refers to an individual's active and conscious role in participation, representation and decision-making process in matters of political opinion. Historically, women have been deprived from participating in politics and the political institution because of the gender roles assigned to them by the society. As a response to it, feminist movement emerged in the West during 19th century advocating women's suffrage. In the subsequent period, women's right to contest elections, representation and participation in the decision-making process emerged as an important area of public discourse. However, it was not an easy task for the women to get recognition in a society dominated by patriarchic ideology. For example, the United Kingdom which colonised almost half of the world for several centuries recognises women's franchise rights only in 1918. Interestingly, in India, women got their voting rights in 1945 just before independence of the country.

Indian Constitution which enshrines the ideals of liberty, equality, justice etc. and making the women of the country feel secure with the promises of survival, equal treatment and gender justice. However, the vision of the constitution has yet to be fulfilled while addressing the complexities of gender disparity. The women are not adequately represented in the decision-making process. In order to ensure gender equality in the decision-making process, number of women representatives has to be increased. Considering these arguments, this article attempts to understand the history of political representation and reservation of women in Indian politics and tries to address the following questions. First, why do we need women reservation in the political sphere? Second, does political representation of women signify political empowerment in true sense of the term? Third, are the provisions of Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam sufficient enough to make women politically empowered and what are the responses of different political stakeholders? However, before we embark on the details, let us briefly understand the concept of gender and politics and its paradoxical relationship.

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## **Gender and Politics: The Paradoxical Relationship**

Gender is a social construct between men and women. It implies that, 'public sphere' is for men whereas 'private sphere' is for women. The concept of gender has socio-cultural connotations attached to the sex roles. Moreover, the construction of gender is deeply embedded to the notion patriarchy which implies domination of the male members. Patriarchy is embedded in the value system which considers women as an 'object', and not as a human being. On the other hand, politics is historically considered as a 'public' subject which is, thus, most explicitly masculine human activity. Women are excluded or discouraged from traditional political activities which indicate a clear gender division where women are underrepresented. Both gender and politics shares a paradoxical relation and that is why the relationship has always been a matter of debate in academic platforms.

The feminist thinkers endeavor to address the marginalisation of women in the politics vis-à-vis other areas of society. Feminism, thus, means a "set of beliefs and ideas that belong to the broad social and political movement to achieve gender equality for women." The inequality between sexes has been critically examined by the feminist. The first wave of feminism during 1960s, marked by the liberalist draws attention to civil and political rights of women. The liberal feminist started their movement to accord individuality and freedom and equal realization for both men and women. And this movement further accelerates with the rise of Radical feminist, Marxist feminist, Post-modern feminist etc. Political participation is an important aspect of citizen's active involvement in political or public institutions. Participation here does not only mean casting vote but also contesting elections and taking part in political institutions. But the matter of the fact is that, women are largely considered secondary and unfit for such positions. Hence, the gender gap still persists in matters of women's political representation across the countries.

## **Current Status of Women Political Representation: The Global Gender Gap**

Gender diversity in leadership especially in terms of senior leadership is quite apparent in all fields. Men outnumber women in senior leadership positions in all industries including in political institutions. The gender gap which existed in politics has been considered as a matter of great concern since on gender is underrepresented and, thus, outnumbered. As per the Global Gender Gap Report (2023) published by World Economic Forum, the global share of women in parliament is 18.7% in 2013 which has risen to 22.9% in 2022. Among them, Europe has the highest number of women representatives followed by Latin America, the Caribbean, North America etc. According to the same Report, no country has yet achieved full gender parity. Even the top nine countries namely – Iceland, Norway, Finland, New Zealand, Sweden, Germany, Nicaragua, Namibia and Lithuania have closed at least 80% of their gap (2023: 5)

The gender gap ratio in case of India is not encouraging. According to the Report, India has closed 64.3% of the overall gender gap. India is ranked at 127 in Global Gender Gap Index in 2023 which was 135 in 2022. It needs mentioning here that, India's neighbouring countries – Bangladesh, China, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan except Pakistan are doing well and positioned ahead. As per the Report, Bangladesh is ranked at 59, China at 107, Nepal at 116, Sri Lanka at 115, Bhutan at 103 and Pakistan at 142. In addition, Indian has registered 25.3% parity with representing 15.1% of parliamentarians since 2006 (2023: 29). One of the root causes of India's poor performance in the global gender gap has been the sheer marginalisation of women in all sections including education, health, employment, politics and so on. Therefore, it is high time that, India put more importance in the participation and representation of women in politics and decision-making process. However, it is important to point here out that, with the implementation of the 73rd Amendment Act under the Indian Constitution which granted 33% reservation to women, representation of women has increased at 44% in the local governance.

## **Political Empowerment of Women in India: Tracing the Background**

During ancient period, women were considered inferior, irrational, non-citizen etc. Women were excluded from participating in political activities since politics was perceived as an exclusive domain of men. Historically, women in Indian society are subjected to various social and economic disabilities due to patriarchy which considered women as secondary and inferior to men. The patriarchal norm established the fact that, women

are best suited for household responsibilities. In the process, women's education was undermined and their household work was given a higher position and compared with Goddess Lakshmi. However, penetration of the colonial rule and their administrative policies had started to encourage women education in India. But, as a result of western education, there is reluctance to the household grihalakshmi image of women. In an essay titled "Naridharma" published in Bengali language in 1877 stated that, those who ignored household work to receive education, such education is meaningless. At the same time, it was also stated that, uneducated women cannot be expert in household work.

There were few women namely – Pandita Ramabai, Rasundari Devi, who involved in public life either secretly to took education or with the approval of their male partner. The Indian freedom struggle was historic in the sense that it led to the beginning of women's participation in the public affairs. Mahatma Gandhi inspired a large number of women to participate in the struggle for political independence. As patriarchy is more resilient, so women lack representation in the politics. But, lack of representation is not conducive for the growth of a democratic political system. So, of late, the question of women representation thus initiates the issue of reservation for women in Indian politics.

The Government of India Act, 1935 provided a wider section of women suffrage rights but it was limited and encumbered by qualifications like literacy, property ownership or marriage to propertied men. The Act granted 41 reserved seats for women to the provincial legislature as well as limited reservation for them in the central legislature.

To make it a purely representative in nature, the Constituent Assembly addressed and included the issues based on the idea of liberty, equality, justice and fraternity. Generally, it is believed that, institutional political space is basically a gendered space which is dominated by male members. But, the Constituent Assembly to a large extent witnessed the female voice and experience the presence of 15 women in the Constituent Assembly. Some of them were – Durga Bai Deshmukh, Lila Roy, Purnima Banerjee, Sarojini Naidu, Rajkumar Amrita etc. They played an important role during the discussions on Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of State Policy, Fundamental Duties which represent equality and justice for women too. Here, we can refer to Hon. Hansa Mehta, who was also a female representative in the Assembly. She debated on the issue of equality and argued not only for the equality of status for women but also equality of opportunities. She stressed on the need for the economic, social and political justice for women which hitherto were excluded. She further argued for the mutual respect and understanding between men and women. Another representative, Hon. Renuka Roy, who was also vocal in expressing her ideas on reservation for women in the Constituent Assembly. Though reservation for women in the legislature is a demand of present-day political context in India, but Renuka Roy said that, reservation of seats was not actually required for women. This reflects the confidence of women representatives. But, as the percentage of women representation in the post independent India was not remarkable, so there has been a continuous effort to reserve seats for women candidates. Soon after independence of the country, the percentage was only 5% which increased slightly to 13% in 2024. In the post-independent period, the Commission for the Status of Women in India published a report titled "Towards Equality Report" in 1974 which also stressed on the reservation of seats for women in the legislative bodies. There need to have some special provision for inclusion of women in politics and as such the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 has introduced 33% reservation of seats for women in the local bodies.

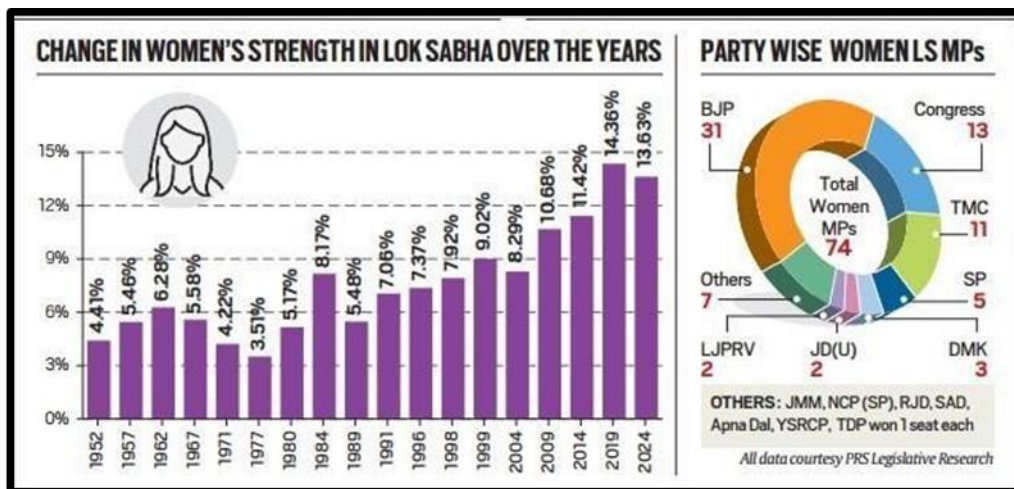
Although, India is considered as one of the largest democratic countries, but women barely hold the highest political position. Since independence, there is only one female Prime Minister and two Presidents in this most populous country of the world. Here, a table has been included to show the number of women representatives in the lower house of the parliament from 1st to 18th Lok Sabha (1952 – 2024).

**Table 1: Representation of Women in Lok Sabha (1952 - 2024)**

Lok Sabha	Total number of seats	Total number of women contested	No of women members won	% of the total
First 1952	489	43	22	4.4
Second 1957	494	45	27	5.4
Third 1962	494	70	34	6.7
Fourth 1967	523	67	31	5.9
Fifth 1971	521	86	22	4.2
Sixth 1977	544	70	19	3.4
Seventh 1980	544	142	28	5.1
Eighth 1984	544	164	44	8.1
Ninth 1989	529	198	28	5.3
Tenth 1991	509	325	36	7.0
Eleventh 1996	543	599	40	7.4
Twelfth 1998	545	274	44	8.0
Thirteenth 1999	543	278	48	8.8
Fourteenth 2004	543	355	45	8.1
Fifteenth 2009	543	556	59	10.9
Sixteenth 2014	545	668	61	11.42
Seventeenth 2019	543	726	78	14.36
Eighteenth 2024	543	797	74	13.63

Source: Election Commission of India, New Delhi

A graphical representation of the women in the Lok Sabha, published in the Indian Express (6th June 2024) also shows a slow, but increasing number of representatives since the first general election took place after independence. However, it needs mentioning here that, the number of women representatives elected in the 2024 Lok Sabha election is 74 at 13.63 % which is marginally lower compared to the 2019 at 14.36%. Here, the graphical representation which also mentions about the party wise women members is included.



Source: Indian Express, 6th June 2024, (Page No: 14)

### Low Representation of Women: Analysing the Key Factors

There are various arguments regarding why women representation in politics has not been increased despite several decades of independence. In fact, this is one of the primary areas of study in the feminist discourse.

One of the primary factors for women's poor representation in politics is the patriarchy. The patriarchal culture has drastically compromised freedom and equality of women in political sphere. The ancient Greek Philosophers like Aristotle did not grant citizenship to women, which was only the privilege of men. French philosopher J. J. Rousseau treated women as secondary who do not carry any individual identity. Even after the independence of India, when the first draft of electoral roll was published it was found that the names of women were not recorded which was revised and corrected after the Election Commission intervened. In recent times although, we have seen increasing number of women voter, but in terms of contesting election or representation their number is not very encouraging.

Issue of women's space in politics is the result of their exclusion on gender basis which is determined by patriarchy. The causes of low representation of women in the political and electoral process is though primarily gendered nature of citizenship (Rai, 2011) it is also seen that lack of special reservation to contest election for women in the national platform, lack of consensus and willingness among political parties to give more tickets to women and in the election, lack of preference for women in the top positions of the political platform etc. are responsible for lower representation of women. However, most importantly we cannot deny the fact that majority women in our country are denied access to education which develops a timid perception towards them resulting low representation.

### **Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam vis-à-vis Reservation of Women: Issues and Concerns**

Political representation of women over the period of time has become a major subject of academic discourse and research. Expansion of opportunities in education, politics, economy etc. will definitely lead to empowerment of women. In politics, absence of women means inadequate representation of gender issues. There are constitutional or political mechanisms in different countries of the world to help the deprived and marginalised sections of the society. The Indian Constitution under Article 15(3) has permitted the state to make special provision for women and children. To compensate the injustices or deprivation of the relevant section affirmative action like reservation are awarded. Affirmative action or positive discrimination refers to a public policy which accords special concession in matters of admission to sought-after courses of education and training, appointments, promotions, housing, health-care etc. to those who were deprived of adequate opportunities in an open competition, particularly due to some discriminatory practices of the past (Gaubha 2023). In this background, the demand has been raised to reserve 33% seats for women in parliament.

Pramila Dandavate, a Member of Parliament (MP) from Janata Dal of Mumbai in the 7th Lok Sabha (1980-84), introduced the idea of women reservation for the first time by introducing a Private Member's Bill. Again, under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime, 'The Women Reservation Bill' was initiated in 2008. But it was pending for several years. Prior to 2008, similar bill was passed in 1996, 1998, and 2000 respectively. Although, women reservation in the Lower House of the Union Parliament of India and State Legislatures was not introduced initially, the local government under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendment Act, 1993 provides 33% reservation to women in the local bodies. It was only on 19th September 2023 Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal introduced a Bill to reserve one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies for women which secure a smooth passage. After several setbacks to introduce women reservation bill, the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam was finally passed in the parliament. The then, Union law minister Arjun Ram Meghwal introduced it on 19th September, 2023. In 1996, the Women Reservation Bill (81st amendment) was first introduced by Ramakant D Khalap, the-then law minister under H. D. Deve Gowda led government on 12th September which will eventually if passed would insert new articles – Article 330A, 332A. However, several leaders of this coalition government were not in favour of the bill. So, the bill had to refer to a joint committee. The bill did not pass later due to lack of political consensus among the leaders. During 1998-2004 NDA (National Democratic Front) government under Atal Bihar Bajpayee made several attempts but the bill did not pass. Similarly in 2004 UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government under Manmohan Singh too was committed to pass the bill, but failed due to lack of unanimity from its coalition partners particularly Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). In 2010, there was a breakthrough when RJD withdraw its previous opposition and the Rajya Sabha passed the bill with support from the BJP and the Left. However, the bill did not pass in the Lok Sabha. Finally, both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha unanimously extend their support and the bill passed in

the parliament. The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam is enacted to ensure reservation of women particularly in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha at the central level and Vidhan Sabha at the state level and Delhi Legislative Assembly. Though, reservation of seats for women is already incorporated in the local self-government system through the 73rd Amendment Act, 1993, the issue did not get recognition at the central and state platform then. Legislations like Nari shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023 is actually form of empowerment that address the roots and structures of inequality that lead to marginalization of women. Though the act is implemented but it will come into force only after decennial census of the country and completion of delimitation of constituencies in the country. It should also be noted here, such provision of reservation shall cease to exist 15 years after the commencement of the Act. The latest status of women in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha is such that there are 78 female representatives in the Lok Sabha out of 545 seats and 24 female representatives in the Rajya Sabha out of 245 seats. Such low representation of women has compelled the parliament to frame a law for women reservation. The recently concluded 18th Lok Sabha has only 74 women and only 7 of them have berth in the government cabinet. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the importance of such provisions which will ensure women empowerment. Further in terms of political representation according to Global Gender Gap index 2023, India's position is lower than its neighbor Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh etc. Therefore, it has been argued that, with increasing number of women in politics, their conditions will be addressed adequately and empathetically.

However, there are some regional political parties which have opposed reservation of women in legislature. According to them, women are not a homogenous group and therefore, how the reservation policy will work is a matter of concern. Others have also questioned on the merit of women in politics whom they feel are not competent like the male. Political parties like RJD, BSP, JD (U) etc. were opposing the reservation mechanism and demanded the need of quota within quota for the marginalised community.

In 2024 Lok Sabha election, according to poll rights body Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) of the total 8337 candidates, only 797 are women representing a mere 9.5% seats only. This is the first general election after the passage of the women reservation bill in 2023 to reserve one third seats for women in Lok Sabha and state assemblies. Hence, there is a significant gender imbalance in representation and issuing tickets to women. Many political analysts and activists questioned and criticised for waiting for the women reservation bill to be implemented instead of proactively issuing tickets to women. Therefore, women's representation in politics in true sense of term seems to be a distant dream.

## **In Conclusion**

Gender equality in all aspects is a sign of progressive society. The reservation of seats for women is required because of the social and economic conditions in which they are placed. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, architect of the Indian Constitution, once said, "I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress women achieved". Reservation of women in the legislature is a contested issue. It is very important to note that to make democracy inclusive, to represent the voice of the women and dispense social justice, reservation of seats for women in the legislature is an ideal step. Hilary Clinton, former Secretary of State of United States, once said "there cannot be true democracy unless women's voices are heard. There cannot be true democracy unless women are given the opportunity to take responsibility for their own lives. There cannot be true democracy unless all citizens are able to participate fully in the lives of their own country". Progressive and substantive steps are very essential for the political empowerment of women. In order to be gender equal in decision making women will have to be far more participatory in public institutions. Legislation like Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam will definitely help women to redress their deprivation and expand their opportunities in the sphere of politics.

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