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Gender Representation in Indian Parliament: Challenges and Way Forward

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Abstract

India, the world's largest democracy, has long grappled with a glaring paradox: a constitutional commitment to gender equality alongside persistent underrepresentation of women in its legislative bodies. Despite comprising nearly half of the national population and an increasingly significant share of the electorate, women's presence in both the Lok Sabha (House of the People) and the Rajya Sabha (Council of States) has remained disproportionately low across most of India's post-independence history. This research paper examines the structural, socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that continue to impede meaningful gender representation in the Indian Parliament. It traces the historical arc of women's parliamentary participation from 1952 to the present, interrogates the promises and limitations of the Women's Reservation Bill (now the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023), and draws on comparative international frameworks to propose evidence-based, actionable recommendations. The paper argues that genuine legislative gender parity demands a multi-pronged approach that simultaneously reforms electoral systems, dismantles patriarchal norms, and strengthens internal party democracy.

Keywords: Gender representation, Indian Parliament, Women's Reservation Bill, Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, political participation, electoral reform, patriarchy.

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1. Introduction

The democratic imagination of a nation is most faithfully measured not merely by the universality of the franchise but by the diversity of those who wield legislative power in its name. In India, the promise of universal adult suffrage, enshrined in the Constitution of 1950, opened formal electoral participation to all citizens irrespective of gender. Yet the translation of voting rights into legislative presence has been marked by an enduring and troubling asymmetry. Women, who constituted 48.4 percent of India's population as per the 2011 census and cast votes in numbers that increasingly rival—and in several states surpass—those of men, have consistently accounted for fewer than fifteen percent of the membership of the Lok Sabha across most electoral cycles.

This under-representation is not merely a statistical anomaly; it is a symptom of deeper structural inequities that shape access to political power in India. Legislative bodies that do not reflect the demographic composition of the society they govern are, by definition, operating with a democratic deficit. Research across multiple national contexts has established that higher women's representation in

legislatures is associated with stronger attention to healthcare policy, education, anti-violence legislation, and welfare schemes—issues that disproportionately affect women and children (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 1409). India's gendered legislative gap thus has tangible policy consequences.

The passage of the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023—commonly known as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam—mandating thirty-three percent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies, represents the most significant legislative intervention on this issue in India's history. Nevertheless, the Act contains a critical condition: its provisions are to take effect only after the completion of the next census and the subsequent delimitation of constituencies, a timeline that could push full implementation to 2029 or beyond. The promise therefore remains deferred, and the structural and cultural impediments that have historically constrained women's political participation remain substantially unaddressed.

This paper situates India's gender representation challenge within its historical, constitutional, and comparative context. It examines the data on women's parliamentary presence over time, analyses the multi-layered barriers to women's political participation, scrutinises the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam in detail, and concludes with a forward-looking policy framework grounded in both domestic imperatives and international best practices.

2. Historical Overview of Women's Parliamentary Representation in India

India's post-independence legislative history reflects a paradox that has frustrated gender advocates for over seven decades. The Constituent Assembly debates of 1946–1949 featured prominent women members such as Sarojini Naidu, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Amrit Kaur, and Hansa Mehta, who made significant contributions to the framing of the Constitution, including provisions that explicitly prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex (Article 15) and guaranteed equality of opportunity in public employment (Article 16). Yet the Constitution did not mandate gender-based reservations in the legislature, a deliberate choice shaped by the dominant liberal-nationalist consensus that formal legal equality was sufficient and that affirmative measures for women were unnecessary or even patronising.

The first general elections of 1952 returned 22 women members to the Lok Sabha, constituting approximately 4.4 percent of its total 489 seats. This figure set the benchmark for a trajectory characterised more by incremental stagnation than by meaningful progress. The 1980 elections saw a modest increase to 28 women members (5.1 percent), while the 1984 wave election, propelled by sympathy votes following Indira Gandhi's assassination, returned 44 women (8 percent)—a figure that would not be surpassed for two decades (Election Commission of India). The 1990s, paradoxically, coincided with the introduction of the seventy-third and seventy-fourth Constitutional Amendments mandating one-third reservation for women in local government bodies (Panchayati Raj Institutions), even as women's representation in the Parliament itself stagnated or declined.

The 2009 Lok Sabha elections saw 59 women elected (10.8 percent), the 2014 elections 62 women (11.4 percent), and the 2019 elections a historic high of 78 women (14.4 percent)—yet still far below the global average of approximately 26 percent and the Inter-Parliamentary Union's threshold of 30 percent considered necessary for women to exercise meaningful influence on legislative outcomes (Inter-Parliamentary Union 3). In the Rajya Sabha, women's representation has similarly hovered between 10 and 14 percent in recent decades. The 2024 general elections returned 74 women to the Lok Sabha, representing 13.6 percent—a slight decline from 2019, underscoring that progress cannot be assumed to be linear or irreversible.

Regional disparities compound the national picture. States like Kerala and West Bengal have historically returned higher proportions of women to both state assemblies and Parliament, while several northern and central Indian states—notably Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan—have consistently returned far fewer. Caste, class, and religious dimensions further intersect with gender to produce complex patterns of inclusion and exclusion that resist simple aggregation.

3. Barriers to Gender Representation: A Multi-Dimensional Analysis

3.1 Structural and Institutional Barriers

The architecture of Indian electoral democracy presents formidable structural obstacles to women's legislative participation. India's first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system, while straightforward in its mechanics, has been demonstrated in comparative research to produce lower levels of women's representation than proportional representation (PR) systems. Under FPTP, parties typically field candidates who are perceived as maximising electoral returns, and prevailing assumptions—however inaccurate—that women candidates are less electable produce a selection bias that restricts nominations. In a system where securing a party ticket is often the principal hurdle, women face a double disadvantage: limited access to the party gatekeepers who control nominations, and scepticism about their viability as candidates.

Candidate selection processes within Indian political parties are characterised by opacity, personalised authority, and the dominance of high-command culture. Few major parties have institutionalised transparent, democratically accountable nomination procedures. The result is a selection environment in which personal loyalty networks, caste arithmetic, financial capacity, and dynastic affiliations frequently trump competence or representational imperatives. Women without familial political connections—India's so-called 'sarpanch patis' phenomenon, where male relatives of elected female Panchayat heads exercise actual power, illustrates a related dynamic—face particular difficulty in accessing these informal networks (Buch 15).

The high cost of electoral campaigns in India constitutes another formidable structural barrier. Expenditure on campaigns for Lok Sabha constituencies routinely exceeds official spending limits by substantial margins. Women candidates, who on average command fewer independent financial resources than their male counterparts and face greater difficulty in accessing donor networks and party funding, are thus systematically disadvantaged. The criminalisation of Indian politics—the fact that a significant proportion of elected legislators in recent decades have declared pending criminal cases—intersects with gendered barriers in complex ways, as women are simultaneously less likely to possess the coercive resources associated with criminality and are more likely to be targeted by politically motivated cases (Association for Democratic Reforms 7).

3.2 Socio-Cultural Barriers

India's political culture is deeply shaped by patriarchal norms that confine women to domestic and caregiving roles and view public life, particularly the rough-and-tumble of electoral politics, as inherently masculine terrain. These norms operate at multiple levels: within families, where women often require male permission or support to contest elections; within communities, where women candidates may face social ostracism or reputational attack; and within the broader electorate, where biases—though declining—against women's political leadership persist.

The problem of political violence and intimidation disproportionately affects women candidates and elected representatives. Women standing for election, particularly in constituencies with a history of electoral violence, face threats that include physical assault, sexual harassment, and targeted social media campaigns. The 2019 and 2024 elections witnessed numerous documented cases of women candidates withdrawing following intimidation (Kumar and Rai 342). The fear of such attacks acts as a powerful deterrent that shapes women's decisions about whether to enter electoral politics in the first place.

Caste intersectionality further complicates the socio-cultural landscape. Dalit and Adivasi women face compounded marginalisation: they are underrepresented not only as women but as members of scheduled castes and tribes who encounter additional layers of discrimination within political parties and broader society. Research by Chakravarti has documented how caste endogamy and the protection of 'family honour' through women's bodies creates specific forms of political vulnerability for women from marginalised communities (Chakravarti 45). The intersection of gender, caste, and class thus produces

differential experiences of political exclusion that require differentiated policy responses.

3.3 Economic Barriers

Economic dependency remains a critical constraint on women's political autonomy in India. Despite significant progress in women's labour force participation in formal sectors, the overall female labour force participation rate in India remains among the lowest in the world at approximately 25 percent as of recent estimates, and the gender wage gap persists across sectors (International Labour Organization 12). Women's relative economic marginalisation translates directly into reduced capacity to fund electoral campaigns, maintain political networks, and sustain the sustained constituency engagement that modern Indian electoral politics demands.

The gendered distribution of unpaid domestic and care work places an additional time burden on women that constrains political participation. A woman who spends the majority of her day in domestic labour—cooking, childcare, eldercare, water and fuel collection—has limited time for the sustained engagement in party work, community outreach, and public life that is prerequisite to a credible electoral candidacy. Policies that address the redistribution of care work—through investment in childcare infrastructure, recognition of domestic labour, and maternity support—are thus not merely welfare measures but prerequisites for substantive political equality.

3.4 Legal and Constitutional Gaps

India's constitutional framework provides important guarantees of formal equality but is insufficiently attentive to substantive equality—the actual conditions required for equal participation. While Articles 14, 15, and 16 prohibit discrimination and Article 15(3) permits special provisions for women, the Constitution did not originally mandate legislative reservations for women at the national level. The Representation of the People Act, 1951, which governs electoral conduct, similarly lacks provisions compelling parties to field a minimum proportion of women candidates. Voluntary measures, such as the Election Commission's non-binding encouragement to parties to field thirty percent women candidates, have produced minimal change in the absence of legal compulsion (Menon 78).

The regulatory framework governing political parties in India is notably weak in respect of internal democratic accountability. There is no statutory requirement for parties to adopt internal democratic procedures for candidate selection, no obligation to report on gender diversity in party organs, and no penalty for persistent failure to field women candidates. This regulatory vacuum allows parties to make rhetorical commitments to gender equality while perpetuating male-dominated selection practices in reality.

4. The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (2023): Promises and Limitations

The passage of the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, by both houses of Parliament in a joint special session in September 2023, was celebrated as a landmark moment in India's democratic evolution. The Act inserts Article 330A into the Constitution, providing for the reservation of not less than one-third of all seats in the House of the People, the Legislative Assemblies of States, and the Legislative Assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi for women. Within the reserved seats, a portion is set aside for women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, in proportion to their existing reservations. The reservation is intended to be rotated among constituencies after each delimitation exercise.

The intellectual and political genealogy of the reservation demand extends back over three decades. The eighty-first Constitutional Amendment Bill, introduced in the Lok Sabha in September 1996 under the United Front government of H. D. Deve Gowda, proposed thirty-three percent reservation for women in Parliament and state assemblies. The bill was referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee and its report, submitted in 1996, recommended passage. However, opposition from parties representing Other Backward Classes (OBCs)—who demanded a sub-quota for OBC women within the women's reservation—along with broader political resistance, blocked passage of the bill through successive Lok

Sabha sessions. The bill lapsed with the dissolution of each Lok Sabha in 1997, 1999, 2004, 2009, and 2014, despite periodic reintroduction (Kishwar 215).

The 2023 Act thus represents the resolution, at least at the formal legislative level, of a nearly three-decade impasse. Its significance should not be minimised: the constitutional entrenchment of one-third reservation represents a binding commitment that cannot easily be reversed by ordinary legislation. The rotational mechanism, while imperfect, ensures that the benefits of reservation are not permanently monopolised by any particular constituency or elite.

Nevertheless, the Act is subject to critical limitations that significantly qualify its transformative potential. Most crucially, the operative provisions are suspended pending the completion of the next census (the 2021 census has been delayed and has not yet been conducted as of 2024) and the subsequent delimitation of parliamentary constituencies, a process that typically takes several years after census data becomes available. Conservative estimates place the earliest implementation at the 2029 general elections; more cautious assessments suggest 2034. Women's representation in Parliament thus remains unchanged by the Act in the immediate term.

A second limitation concerns the absence of a sub-quota for OBC women. The demand for OBC sub-reservation, articulated by parties such as the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal, reflects a genuine concern that without sub-quotas, the benefits of reservation will disproportionately accrue to upper-caste women. Evidence from state legislatures and Panchayati Raj Institutions where reservation has been implemented suggests that such concerns are not without foundation: in many states, the beneficiaries of women's reservation have disproportionately come from dominant social groups (Deshpande and Palshikar 34). The Act's silence on OBC sub-reservation thus risks producing a numerically inclusive but socially narrow expansion of women's parliamentary presence.

The rotational mechanism for reservation presents its own complications. By rotating reserved constituencies after each delimitation, the Act creates a situation in which women elected from reserved seats may face significant uncertainty about their electoral future, potentially discouraging the investment in constituency building that long-term legislative effectiveness requires. Critics have argued that reserved seats should be identified on the basis of historical under-representation of women, with some permanence in designation to permit sustained constituency relationships.

5. Comparative International Perspectives

A comparative analysis of gender representation in legislatures globally reveals both the possibilities for transformative change and the diversity of institutional pathways through which such change has been achieved. As of 2024, the Inter-Parliamentary Union reports that women comprise 26.9 percent of members of lower houses of parliament globally, with significant variation across regions and countries (Inter-Parliamentary Union 5). Rwanda tops the global rankings with women comprising over sixty percent of its Chamber of Deputies—a figure achieved through a constitutional reservation of thirty percent combined with additional proportional representation seats won on party lists. The Nordic countries—Iceland, Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark—achieve women's representation rates of forty to fifty percent without mandatory reservations, primarily through combination of proportional representation electoral systems, voluntary party quotas, and deeply embedded cultural norms of gender equality.

Several lessons emerge for the Indian context from comparative analysis. First, the type of electoral system significantly shapes outcomes: proportional representation and mixed member systems consistently produce higher levels of women's representation than single-member plurality systems like FPTP. Research by Norris and Lovenduski has established that under PR systems, parties have stronger incentives to field diverse candidate slates, as voters choose between parties rather than individual candidates, making diversity a positional good for parties (Norris and Lovenduski 198). India's commitment to its FPTP system is strong and unlikely to change in the short term, but hybrid mechanisms—reserved constituencies, party candidate quotas—can partially compensate for the

representational limitations of FPTP.

Second, voluntary party quotas, while lacking the binding force of legal mandates, have produced significant results in several national contexts. The major political parties in Sweden, Norway, and Germany adopted voluntary gender targets from the 1970s onwards, and these voluntary commitments, reinforced by feminist advocacy within parties and strong accountability mechanisms, drove women's representation to above forty percent before any statutory requirements were introduced. India's experience with voluntary measures has been less successful, primarily because accountability mechanisms within parties are weak and the costs of non-compliance minimal.

Third, the Rwandan experience demonstrates that dramatic changes in representation are achievable within a short timeframe when backed by strong constitutional and political commitment. Rwanda's success is, however, contextually specific: it emerged in the wake of the 1994 genocide, which both decimated male political leadership and created a political opening for radical institutional redesign that few functioning democracies experience. The lessons for India are therefore partial, but the central insight—that robust mandatory mechanisms can produce rapid representational change—has broad applicability.

South Africa's experience with proportional representation party list systems, in which the African National Congress and other major parties have maintained gender parity requirements on their lists, provides a more directly relevant model. Women comprise approximately 46 percent of the National Assembly as of 2024—a figure achieved through a combination of proportional representation electoral rules, strong party voluntary commitments, and an enabling post-apartheid constitutional culture (Inter-Parliamentary Union 6). India could draw on the South African experience in designing mandatory candidate quotas applicable to national-list components of a reformed electoral system, or in strengthening the accountability framework for party candidate selection.

6. Way Forward: A Multi-Pronged Policy Framework

6.1 Expediting Implementation of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam

The most immediate priority is the removal of the census and delimitation conditions that defer implementation of the 2023 Act. The government should expedite the completion of the long-delayed 2021 census, and consideration should be given to amending the Act to permit implementation on the basis of existing 2011 census data, with adjustments after the next delimitation. Each successive general election conducted without the Act's provisions in force represents a missed opportunity and an erosion of the constitutional commitment made in 2023. Parliamentary pressure, civil society advocacy, and judicial engagement should be mobilised to hold the government accountable to the fastest possible implementation timeline.

6.2 Mandatory Candidate Quotas for Political Parties

Pending full implementation of the constitutional reservation, mandatory candidate quotas should be introduced through amendment to the Representation of the People Act, requiring all recognised political parties to field a minimum of thirty-three percent women candidates in both Lok Sabha and state assembly elections. Non-compliance should be accompanied by meaningful penalties, including partial or full forfeiture of state campaign finance allocations and potential derecognition for persistent violators. Voluntary targets, as India's experience has repeatedly demonstrated, are insufficient. The Election Commission should be empowered to monitor and enforce compliance and to publicly rank parties by their gender diversity in candidate selection.

6.3 Electoral System Reform

India should explore partial electoral system reform to introduce proportional or mixed-member elements that are more conducive to women's representation. A mixed-member proportional system, in which a portion of seats is allocated through party lists using proportional representation, would allow parties to demonstrate gender diversity on their lists while retaining the constituency link that many Indian voters

value. Such reform would require broad political consensus and careful design, but its potential to significantly increase women's representation—as demonstrated by the New Zealand and German experiences—justifies sustained policy attention and experimentation at the state level.

6.4 Addressing the OBC Sub-Quota Gap

The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam should be amended to include a sub-quota for Other Backward Class women within the overall women's reservation. This would require a constitutional amendment and political negotiation with parties representing OBC constituencies, but it is essential for ensuring that the benefits of reservation are equitably distributed across social groups. Simultaneously, the rotational mechanism should be reviewed to permit greater continuity in reserved constituencies, enabling women representatives to build sustained relationships with their constituencies and develop legislative expertise over multiple terms.

6.5 Strengthening Women's Political Education and Party Capacity

Structural reforms must be complemented by investments in women's political capacity. Major political parties should be required or encouraged to establish dedicated internal wings for women's political education and leadership development, with funding tied to demonstrable outcomes in candidate selection. Civil society organisations, women's universities, and independent electoral academies should receive public funding to provide aspiring women candidates with training in electoral campaigning, legislative procedure, public communication, and financial management. The Election Commission should establish a Women's Leadership in Democracy Fund to co-finance such initiatives.

6.6 Tackling Electoral Violence and Online Harassment

The regulatory framework governing electoral conduct must be strengthened to address the specific vulnerabilities faced by women candidates and representatives. The Model Code of Conduct should be amended to include explicit provisions on gendered electoral violence, with fast-track reporting and response mechanisms. Law enforcement agencies responsible for electoral security should receive specialised training on gender-based electoral violence. Social media platforms should be required, under threat of regulatory sanction, to implement faster and more effective protocols for removing targeted harassment of women in public life, and India's cyber law framework should be updated to provide specific remedies for gendered online abuse in electoral contexts (Kaur and Sharma 89).

6.7 Addressing Structural Economic Barriers

Reforms to the economics of electoral competition are necessary to reduce the financial barriers facing women candidates. Public financing of elections, on an equitable per-candidate basis with gender-weighted allocations favouring women candidates, would partially compensate for the fundraising disadvantages that women face. Campaign expenditure limits should be rigorously enforced, and the penalties for violation increased. Expanded childcare infrastructure, paid parental leave policies, and recognition of unpaid domestic labour in welfare calculations would address the structural economic constraints on women's time and resources that underpin political marginalisation.

7. Conclusion

Gender representation in India's Parliament stands at a critical juncture. The passage of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam in 2023 constitutes a historic commitment—the most significant legislative acknowledgment that India's democracy is incomplete without equitable women's representation. Yet the deferred timeline of implementation, the unresolved OBC sub-quota question, and the persistence of deep structural, cultural, and economic barriers remind us that legislative milestones are necessary but not sufficient conditions for transformative change.

The argument for gender parity in Parliament is not merely instrumental—though the evidence that diverse legislatures produce better, more inclusive policy outcomes is compelling. It is, at its core, a democratic argument: that the legitimacy and representativeness of a democratic institution is inseparable

from its capacity to reflect the full diversity of the society it governs. A Parliament in which women constitute less than fifteen percent of members—in a nation where women are half the population, half the electorate, and disproportionate bearers of the social costs of policy failure—is a Parliament that has not yet fulfilled its democratic promise.

The way forward requires sustained, multi-pronged action: expedited implementation of constitutional reservation, mandatory candidate quotas with real enforcement, incremental electoral system reform, targeted investments in women's political capacity, strengthened legal protections against electoral violence, and deeper cultural transformation driven by women's organisations, civil society, and progressive political leadership. No single intervention is sufficient; the barriers are interlocking, and the solutions must be correspondingly comprehensive.

India has, in its history, demonstrated the capacity for transformative democratic innovation—in the universal franchise of 1950, in the Panchayati Raj revolution of 1992, and in the passage of the 2023 Act. The challenge now is to match the ambition of the legislative commitment with the political will and institutional investment necessary to make women's equal representation in Parliament not merely a constitutional aspiration, but a lived democratic reality.

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