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Half the Nation, Half the Parliament:  
The Constitutional, Historical, and Moral Case for Women's  
Reservation in India's Parliament

Priya Gupta and Charan Singh

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# Half the Nation, Half the Parliament:

## The Constitutional, Historical, and Moral Case for Women's Reservation in India's Parliament

By

Priya Gupta<sup>1</sup> and Charan Singh<sup>2</sup>

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### *Abstract*

This article examines the constitutional, historical, moral, and economic foundations of women's reservation in the Indian Parliament. Using election data from 1952–2024, comparative international evidence, and empirical research on the governance outcomes of women's political participation, it argues that the absence of operative reservation constitutes a constitutional dereliction, democratic anomaly, and economic cost. Although women comprise approximately 50 per cent of India's population and electorate, they hold only 13.63 per cent of Lok Sabha seats—below both the global average (27.6%) and the South Asian average. While the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023 mandates a minimum 33 per cent reservation, it remains unimplemented. The article traces the four-decade legislative history of women's reservation, situates India comparatively, and builds an economic case using human capital theory, labour economics, and evidence from India's Panchayati Raj institutions. It also examines the social implications of women's empowerment in India's predominantly patrilineal society, arguing that women's multitasking capacities developed within these communities are a significant yet underrecognised governance asset. It concludes that a standalone constitutional amendment implementing reservation in existing constituencies through a rotational mechanism is both constitutionally valid and substantively necessary.

**Keywords:** women's reservation, constitutional amendment, political representation, gender equality, democratic legitimacy, governance outcomes, economic development, Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam

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## 1. Introduction

The question of women's representation in legislative bodies has occupied democratic theory and constitutional law since the earliest formulations of universal suffrage. The normative case for gender parity in elected institutions rests on at least three distinct pillars: the descriptive representation argument, which holds that legislatures ought to mirror the demographic composition of the polity they govern (Phillips, 1995); the substantive representation argument, which holds that women legislators systematically advance policy priorities that are underserved in male-dominated institutions (Htun and Weldon, 2018); and the symbolic representation argument, which holds that the visible presence of women in positions of authority generates measurable effects on the aspirations, labour force participation, and civic engagement of women and girls in the broader society (Beaman et al., 2012).

India presents an acute and well-documented instance of the gap between constitutional commitment and democratic reality. The Constitution of India, adopted in 1950, establishes equality before the law (Article 14), prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex (Article 15), and guarantees universal adult suffrage (Articles 325 and 326). These are operative obligations, not programmatic aspirations. Notwithstanding this framework, women have constituted, on average, fewer than 9 per cent of Lok Sabha membership across the eighteen general elections held between 1952 and 2024. In the most recent election, held in 2024, women held 74 of 543 seats, or 13.63 per cent, a figure that represents a decline from the 2019 record of 78 seats (14.36%), and one that places India well below the global average of 27.6 per cent (IPU, 2024).

The Constitution (106th Amendment) Act 2023, enacted as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, represents the most significant legislative advance in this area in over three decades. Passed with a majority of 454 to 2 in the Lok Sabha and 214 to 0 in the Rajya Sabha, it inserted Articles 330A and 332A into the Constitution, mandating a minimum of one-third reservation of total Lok Sabha seats for women. However, the implementing legislation has not been enacted; the operationalisation of the reservation is linked to a forthcoming census and delimitation exercise. The Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill 2026, introduced to establish an implementation pathway, was defeated in the Lok Sabha in April 2026, falling short of the required two-thirds majority (LiveLaw, 2026).

This article proceeds in nine substantive sections. Sections 1 and 2 establish the historical record of women's leadership in India, from the Vedic period through the independence movement and into post-independence governance. Section 3 analyses seventy-two years of election data, demonstrating that the organic rate of growth in women's parliamentary representation is wholly inadequate to meet the constitutional standard within any defensible democratic timeframe. Section 4 situates India within an international comparative framework. Section 5 documents the four-decade legislative history of the reservation effort. Sections 6 and 7 present the governance and economic arguments for reservation, with Section 7 offering an extended treatment of the economic evidence base. Section 8 addresses the constitutional validity of a standalone implementation mechanism. The article concludes with a synthesis of the principal arguments and a recommendation for legislative action.

# 1. From the Vedas to the Vote: Women's Leadership in Historical Perspective

## 1.1 Ancient and Medieval India

A principled assessment of women's capacity for governance and intellectual leadership in the Indian context cannot be grounded in contemporary metrics alone. India's own civilisational record establishes a continuous tradition of women's participation in public intellectual life, administrative authority, and military command that predates, by several centuries, the constitutional frameworks through which modern democracies have sought to formalise such participation.

The Vedic period (c. 1500–500 BCE) produced a documented tradition of women as authors of sacred texts and participants in philosophical discourse. The Rigveda, the oldest of India's foundational texts, contains hymns composed by women, including Lopamudra (Mandala 1, Hymn 179) and Maitreyi, who is also recorded as a primary philosophical interlocutor of Yajnavalkya in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (Olivelle translation). The dialogue between Gargi Vachaknavi and Yajnavalkya, conducted before an assembled audience, represents one of the earliest documented instances of a woman engaging a male philosopher in formal public debate in the ancient world. These are not mythological accretions; they are textual records, subject to the same standards of historical interpretation applied to other primary sources of the period.

In the medieval period, women rulers exercised military command and administrative authority on a scale commensurate with their male contemporaries. Razia Sultana governed the Delhi Sultanate (1236–1240 CE) with full military authority. Ahalya Bai Holkar administered the Maratha Holkar kingdom for twenty-eight years (1767–1795) and left an administrative record characterised by judicial reform and infrastructure development that continued to define the region for generations. Tarabai held the Maratha Empire intact during the most dangerous period of Mughal military pressure following Aurangzeb's campaigns (1700–1707). These examples are not exceptions to a patriarchal norm. They represent recurring evidence of a structural principle: when institutional barriers are removed, women's capacity for leadership asserts itself. Table 1 presents a selection of women who contributed to India's intellectual, political, and administrative history across the ancient and medieval periods.

**Table 1: Women as Thinkers, Rulers, and Administrators in Ancient and Medieval India**

| Figure                      | Period                | Contribution                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gargi Vachaknavi            | c. 700 BCE<br>(Vedic) | Engaged Yajnavalkya in public philosophical debate as recorded in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad; among the earliest documented instances of a woman participating in formal intellectual discourse in the ancient world |
| Maitreyi                    | c. 700 BCE<br>(Vedic) | Philosopher and Vedic poet; a primary disciple of Yajnavalkya; hymns preserved in the Rigveda                                                                                                                          |
| Lopamudra                   | Vedic period          | Author of Rigvedic hymns (RV 1.179); among the earliest women composers in recorded human history                                                                                                                      |
| Razia Sultana               | 1236–1240 CE          | First and only woman Sultan of Delhi; commanded armies and administered the Delhi Sultanate                                                                                                                            |
| Ahalya Bai Holkar           | 1767–1795 CE          | Administered the Maratha Holkar kingdom for twenty-eight years; recognised for legal reform, infrastructure development, and administrative equity                                                                     |
| Lakshmi Bai, Rani of Jhansi | 1857                  | Led armed resistance against British annexation; a principal symbol of organised nationalist opposition to colonial rule                                                                                               |
| Tarabai                     | 1700–1707 CE          | Regent of the Maratha Empire; preserved imperial integrity during the most critical period of Mughal military pressure following Aurangzeb's campaigns                                                                 |
| Lilavati                    | 12th century CE       | Namesake of the celebrated mathematical treatise Lilavati attributed to Bhaskaracharya; her name became identified with a tradition of women's engagement with formal mathematics in medieval India                    |

Source: Author's compilation based on Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (Olivelle, tr.); Rigveda, Mandala 1; standard historiographical records.

## 1.2 Women in India's Independence Movement

The Indian independence movement (c. 1905–1947) was not exclusively a masculine project. Women constituted a substantial, frequently frontline, and often decisive element of every principal campaign from the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920 through the Quit India Movement of 1942. They were arrested, imprisoned, and in several cases died in British detention. They organised at the district level, provided strategic leadership at the national level, and represented the movement on international platforms.

Sarojini Naidu was elected President of the Indian National Congress in 1925, more than two decades before independence. She led a contingent in the Salt March, negotiated with colonial officials, and addressed international audiences. Aruna Asaf Ali, on 9 August 1942, hoisted the

Congress flag at Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay immediately following the arrest of the entire senior Congress leadership, sustaining the visibility and organisational momentum of the Quit India Movement at its most structurally vulnerable moment. Madam Bhikaji Cama designed the first iteration of the Indian national flag and displayed it before an international gathering at the Stuttgart Socialist International Congress in 1907. Captain Lakshmi Sahgal commanded the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army as both a military officer and a surgeon.

These contributions are documented in standard historical records and are not contested. They establish, with finality, that the women who fought for India's independence did not do so in order to exclude themselves from the governance of the state they helped create. Table 2 presents the contributions of principal women leaders across the major campaigns of India's independence movement.

**Table 2: Women Leaders of India's Independence Movement**

| <b>Leader</b>         | <b>Role in India's Freedom Struggle</b>                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sarojini Naidu        | President, Indian National Congress (1925); led the Salt March contingent; first woman Governor of an Indian state; poet and architect of national consciousness                                                    |
| Aruna Asaf Ali        | Hoisted the Congress flag at Gowalia Tank Maidan on 9 August 1942 following the arrest of the entire senior Congress leadership; instrumental in sustaining the Quit India Movement at its most vulnerable juncture |
| Kasturba Gandhi       | Participated in the Champaran Satyagraha, Non-Cooperation Movement, and Quit India Movement; arrested multiple times; died in British detention in 1944                                                             |
| Usha Mehta            | Operated the clandestine Congress Radio during the Quit India Movement; broadcast Gandhian messaging in defiance of colonial prohibition; arrested and imprisoned                                                   |
| Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit | Imprisoned three times by British colonial authorities; subsequently became the first woman President of the United Nations General Assembly (1953) and India's first woman ambassador                              |
| Madam Bhikaji Cama    | Designed the first iteration of the Indian national flag; presented it before an international audience at the Stuttgart Socialist International Congress in 1907                                                   |
| Durgabai Deshmukh     | Led women's participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement at the age of twelve; member of the Constituent Assembly; co-drafted constitutional provisions on women's rights                                       |
| Sucheta Kripalani     | Member of the Constituent Assembly; performed the singing of Vande Mataram at the midnight independence session on 15 August 1947; subsequently the first woman Chief Minister of an Indian state                   |

|                      |                                                                                                                                                          |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Capt. Lakshmi Sahgal | Commander of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, Indian National Army (Azad Hind Fauj); surgeon and frontline officer in armed resistance against colonial rule |
| Annie Besant         | Founder, Home Rule League (1916); first woman President of the Indian National Congress (1917); editor of New India                                      |

Source: Author's compilation based on standard historiographical records of India's independence movement.

## 2. Women at the Highest Levels of Post-Independence Governance

Post-independence India has produced women leaders at every tier of the executive, legislative, judicial, and diplomatic branches of governance, often in advance of comparable advances in comparable democracies. The record is not contested and not marginal; it is central to any honest assessment of women's capacity for governance at the national level.

Indira Gandhi served as Prime Minister from 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 to 1984, making her the longest-serving Prime Minister of India after Jawaharlal Nehru. Her tenure encompassed two armed conflicts, a nuclear test, the management of the Green Revolution, and the Emergency period. Pratibha Patil served as the twelfth President of India (2007–2012), becoming the first woman to hold the highest constitutional office. Draupadi Murmu has served as the fifteenth President since 2022, the first woman of tribal heritage to hold that position. Meira Kumar became the first woman Speaker of the Lok Sabha in 2009. Nirmala Sitharaman has served as Finance Minister since 2019, presenting multiple consecutive Union Budgets, the first full-time woman Finance Minister in India's history.

The record at the state level is similarly extensive. Sucheta Kripalani was the first woman Chief Minister of any Indian state, serving in Uttar Pradesh from 1963. Mamata Banerjee has governed West Bengal since 2011. J. Jayalalithaa served six terms as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, commanding a parliamentary organisation that dominated the state's politics for decades. Sheila Dikshit served as Chief Minister of Delhi for three consecutive terms (1998–2013), overseeing transformative improvements in public transport and urban infrastructure.

These examples collectively establish a pattern that warrants the weight of a structural inference: where women in India have been positioned in executive authority, they have governed capably and, in several cases, with distinction. The argument that Indian women are institutionally or intellectually unprepared for legislative participation at the national level is strongly contradicted by seven and a half decades of documented post-independence experience. Table 3 presents the complete record of women who have held high constitutional and administrative office in independent India.

**Table 3: Women in High Constitutional and Administrative Office in Independent India**

| Leader         | Position Held      | Significance                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Indira Gandhi  | Prime Minister     | Served 1966–1977 and 1980–1984; longest-serving Prime Minister after Jawaharlal Nehru; led India through two armed conflicts and a nuclear test |
| Pratibha Patil | President of India | Twelfth President (2007–2012); first woman to hold the highest constitutional office                                                            |
| Draupadi Murmu | President of India | Fifteenth President (2022–present); first woman of tribal heritage to serve as President of India                                               |

|                       |                                |                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sonia Gandhi          | INC President                  | Longest-serving President of the Indian National Congress (1998–2017); led the UPA coalition to two consecutive Lok Sabha majorities                                      |
| Meira Kumar           | Speaker, Lok Sabha             | First woman Speaker of the Lok Sabha (2009–2014)                                                                                                                          |
| Nirmala Sitharaman    | Finance Minister               | First full-time woman Finance Minister; has presented multiple consecutive Union Budgets since 2019                                                                       |
| Sushma Swaraj         | External Affairs Minister      | Transformed India's consular diplomacy; first woman External Affairs Minister from the BJP                                                                                |
| Sucheta Kripalani     | Chief Minister, Uttar Pradesh  | First woman Chief Minister of any Indian state (1963)                                                                                                                     |
| Mamata Banerjee       | Chief Minister, West Bengal    | Chief Minister since 2011; founder and leader of the All India Trinamool Congress                                                                                         |
| J. Jayalithaa         | Chief Minister, Tamil Nadu     | Six-term Chief Minister; led the AIADMK to successive parliamentary dominance                                                                                             |
| Vasundhara Raje       | Chief Minister, Rajasthan      | Two-term Chief Minister; commanded the Rajasthan BJP organisation for over three decades                                                                                  |
| Sheila Dikshit        | Chief Minister, Delhi          | Three-term Chief Minister of the National Capital Territory (1998–2013); oversaw substantive improvements in public transport, power infrastructure, and urban governance |
| Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit | President, UN General Assembly | First woman President of the United Nations General Assembly (1953)                                                                                                       |

Source: Author's compilation based on Election Commission of India; Parliament of India official records; Ministry of External Affairs.

### 3. Seventy-Two Years of Data: The Representation Deficit

India has conducted eighteen general elections since 1952. The trajectory of women's representation in the Lok Sabha across this period is characterised by incremental and non-linear growth, periodic reversals, and a 2024 outcome that represents a decline in the absolute number of women MPs, notwithstanding the existence of a constitutionally enacted reservation mandate.

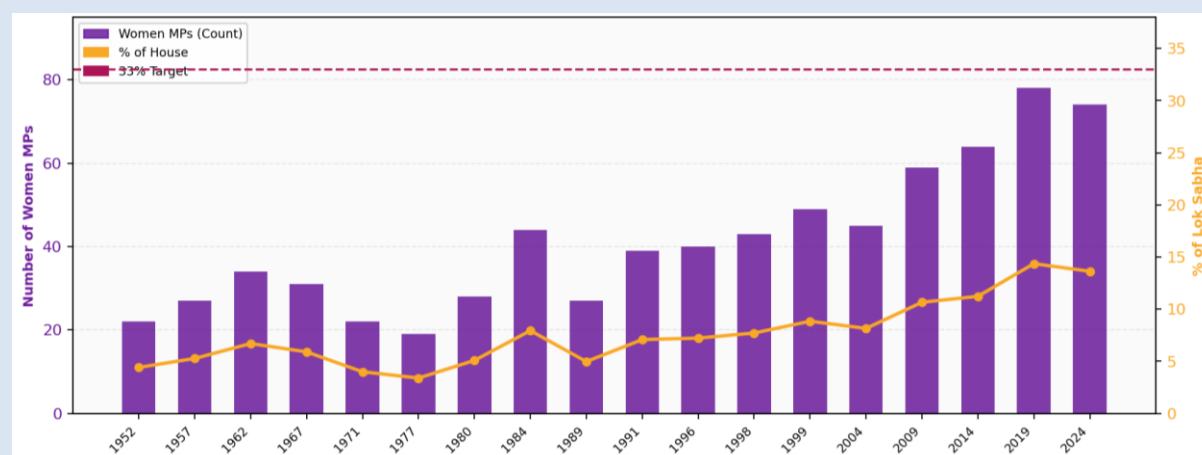
Women constituted 4.41 per cent of the first Lok Sabha in 1952. Over the following seven decades, this figure increased to a maximum of 14.36 per cent in 2019. In 2024, following the unanimous passage of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, that share fell to 13.63 per cent. Seventy-two years of general elections have produced a net gain of fewer than ten percentage points in women's share of parliamentary seats. Table 4 presents the election-wise record across all eighteen Lok Sabha elections from 1952 to 2024. Figure 1 plots both the absolute count and the percentage share of women MPs across the same period. Figure 2 extends this trajectory forward under linear projection assumptions, illustrating the inadequacy of organic growth as a pathway to the constitutionally mandated 33 per cent threshold.

**Table 4: Women Members of Parliament in the Lok Sabha, 1952 to 2024**

| Election Year | Lok Sabha   | Total Seats | Women MPs (%)      | Key Event                                                                                                      |
|---------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1952          | 1st         | 489         | 22 (4.41%)         | First general election                                                                                         |
| 1962          | 3rd         | 494         | 34 (6.70%)         | Highest share across the first three decades                                                                   |
| 1971          | 5th         | 521         | 22 (3.99%)         | Decline despite widespread women's mobilisation                                                                |
| 1977          | 6th         | 542         | 19 (3.39%)         | All-time historical low                                                                                        |
| 1984          | 8th         | 542         | 44 (7.94%)         | Surge attributed in part to sympathy wave following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi          |
| 1992          | —           | —           | —                  | Enactment of 73rd and 74th Amendments: 33% reservation mandated in Panchayati Raj institutions                 |
| 1996          | 11th        | 543         | 40 (7.22%)         | First Women's Reservation Bill introduced in Parliament                                                        |
| 2009          | 15th        | 543         | 59 (10.66%)        | First election at which women's representation exceeded 10 per cent                                            |
| 2019          | 17th        | 543         | 78 (14.36%)        | All-time high; record number of women elected to the Lok Sabha                                                 |
| <b>2024</b>   | <b>18th</b> | <b>543</b>  | <b>74 (13.63%)</b> | <b>Decline recorded despite the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam having been signed into law the previous year</b> |

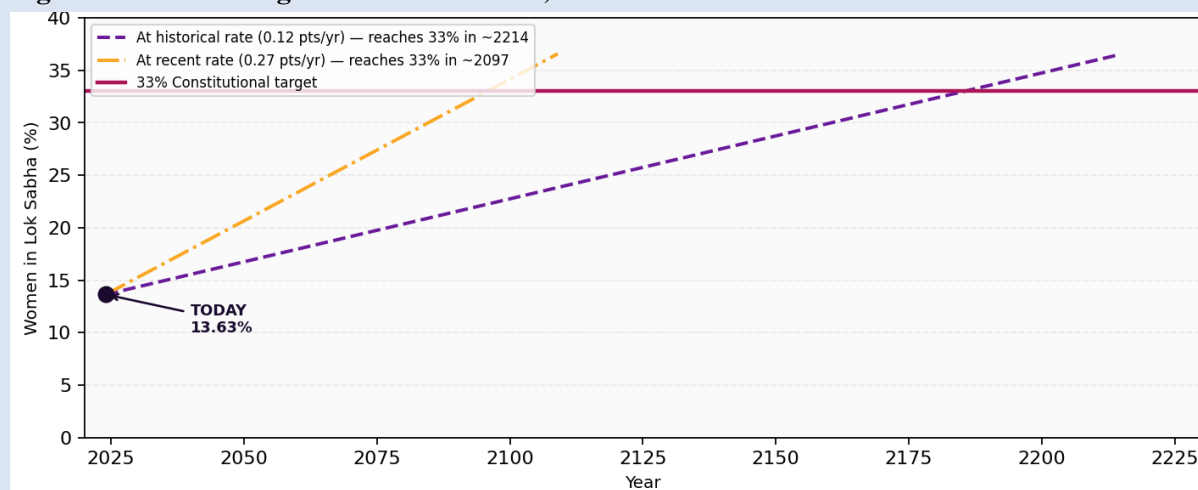
Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI, 2024); Parliament of India.

**Figure 1: Women MPs in the Lok Sabha, 1952 to 2024 (Count and Percentage of House)**



Source: Author's compilation based on MOSPI (2024); Parliament of India.

**Figure 2: Without Legislative Intervention, When Will India Reach 33%?**



Source: Author's projection based on MOSPI (2024) historical data; linear trend assumption applied.

### PROJECTION ANALYSIS

Under a linear extrapolation of the historical rate of increase (approximately 0.12 percentage points per year), India would reach the 33 per cent constitutional threshold in approximately 2214. At the accelerated rate observed over the past decade (0.27 percentage points per year), the target would not be reached until approximately 2097. Even generous non-linear assumptions place the constitutional benchmark well beyond any acceptable democratic timeline. These projections are not predictions; they are demonstrations that the structural conditions producing the current rate of growth are categorically insufficient to achieve the mandated outcome. Legislative intervention is not one option among several. It is, under any defensible empirical assumption, mathematically necessary.

The 2019 Lok Sabha, which returned a record 78 women members, generated considerable commentary on the progress of women's representation. The 2024 election, conducted in the year following the enactment of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, returned four fewer women members. This is not a statistical anomaly. It is an illustration of the principal finding of the cross-national comparative literature on gender quotas: without structural intervention, candidate selection processes governed by party systems operating under majoritarian electoral rules do not produce gender parity as an emergent outcome (Dahlerup, 2006; Krook, 2009).

## 4. India in Global Context: A Comparative Democratic Assessment

India's standing in international rankings for women's parliamentary representation warrants examination as a matter of both democratic accountability and national competitiveness. As of 2024, India ranks in the lower tercile of all countries for which the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) maintains data, with a women's representation rate of 13.6 per cent against a global average of 27.6 per cent (IPU, 2024).

The comparative disadvantage is not confined to advanced democracies. India records lower women's parliamentary representation than Pakistan (20%), Bangladesh (21%), and Nepal

(33.6%), all of which share geopolitical, cultural, and developmental contexts broadly comparable to India's own. Nepal enacted a constitutional 33 per cent quota in 2015 and implemented it within two years, without conditioning operationalisation on a census or constituency delimitation exercise. Bangladesh maintains 50 reserved seats in a parliament of 350. Pakistan allocates 60 reserved seats proportionally to party strength. Each of these countries has implemented its mechanism in less time than India has spent debating whether implementation should be deferred.

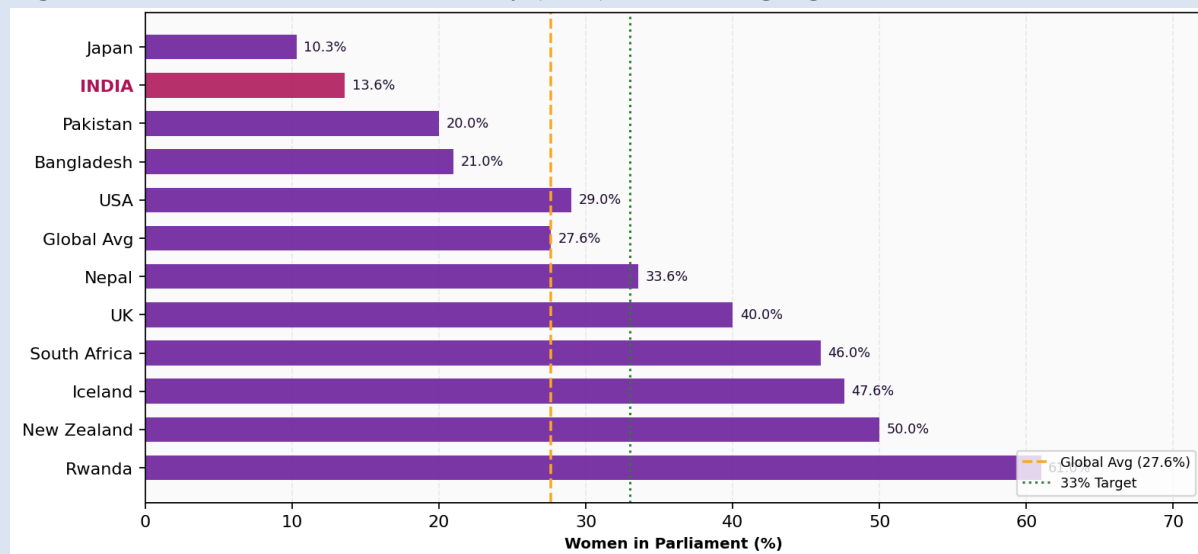
The international evidence on quota mechanisms is instructive. Rwanda, which rebuilt its constitutional order from near-total collapse following the 1994 genocide, adopted a constitutional quota mandating a minimum of 30 per cent women's representation in parliament and implemented it immediately; women currently hold 61 per cent of parliamentary seats, the highest proportion in the world. New Zealand's Mixed Member Proportional system has produced 50 per cent women's representation without a formal gender quota. The United Kingdom has achieved 40 per cent through voluntary all-women shortlists adopted by major parties. The common thread across all successful cases is the willingness to treat gender parity as a structural design requirement rather than an organic emergent outcome. Table 5 presents a twelve-country comparative assessment, and Figure 3 illustrates the comparative position of selected countries visually.

**Table 5: Women's Parliamentary Representation in Selected Countries (2024)**

| Country             | Women in Parliament | Mechanism                                        | Implementation                                                        |
|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Rwanda              | 61%                 | Constitutional quota (minimum 30%)               | Immediate — no census precondition                                    |
| New Zealand         | 50%                 | Mixed Member Proportional system                 | Electoral system design                                               |
| Iceland             | 47.6%               | Voluntary party quotas                           | Party-level implementation                                            |
| South Africa        | 46%                 | Party list quotas                                | Party-administered mechanism                                          |
| United Kingdom      | 40%                 | All-Women Shortlists (party-level)               | Party-level implementation                                            |
| Nepal               | 33.6%               | Constitutional 33% quota                         | Implemented 2017 — no census condition attached                       |
| Global Average      | 27.6%               | Varies                                           | Varies                                                                |
| United States       | 29%                 | No formal quota                                  | Organic electoral process                                             |
| Bangladesh          | 21%                 | Reserved seats (50 of 350)                       | Implemented immediately upon enactment                                |
| Pakistan            | 20%                 | Reserved seats (60 of 336)                       | Allocated proportionally to party strength                            |
| <b>India (2024)</b> | <b>13.6%</b>        | <b>106th Amendment (33%) — not yet operative</b> | <b>Deferred: operationalisation linked to census and delimitation</b> |
| Japan               | 10.3%               | No formal quota                                  | Organic electoral process                                             |

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Women in National Parliaments: World Classification, 2024.

**Figure 3: Women in Parliament Globally (2024) — India Highlighted**



Source: Author's compilation based on IPU (2024).

### CRITICAL OBSERVATION

The cross-national evidence does not support the proposition that women's parliamentary quota implementation requires a prior census or constituency delimitation exercise. Nepal implemented its 33 per cent constitutional quota within one year of constitutional adoption. Rwanda's constitutional quota was implemented in the first post-constitutional election without conditionality. India's conditionality clause is, on the available comparative evidence, without precedent among countries that have successfully implemented women's parliamentary quotas.

## 5. Four Decades of Deferred Justice: The Legislative Record

No other constitutional amendment in India's post-independence history has been introduced, lapsed, reintroduced, passed in one chamber, blocked in another, ultimately enacted, and immediately rendered inoperative through conditionality in the manner of the women's reservation legislation. The legislative history spans four decades, encompasses eleven parliamentary sessions, six governments of varying partisan composition, and more procedural failures than any other constitutional reform of comparable political salience. Table 6 presents the complete chronological record of every legislative attempt, from the Margaret Alva Committee report of 1987 to the defeat of the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill in 2026. Figure 4 illustrates the same trajectory visually.

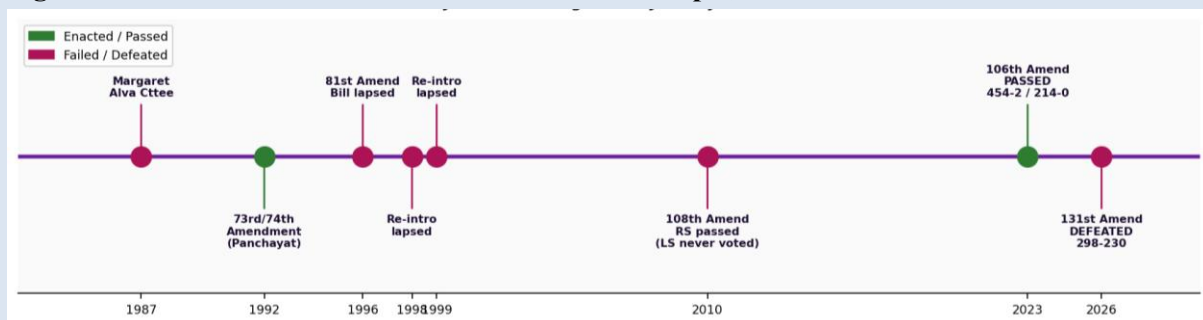
**Table 6: The Legislative Journey of Women's Reservation in India, 1987 to 2026**

| Year | Status     | What Occurred                                                                                                                                            |
|------|------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1987 | Introduced | Margaret Alva Committee report recommends one-third reservation in local bodies; Amendment Bill passes the Lok Sabha but fails in the Rajya Sabha (1989) |

|      |                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|------|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1992 | <b>ENACTED</b>  | 73rd and 74th Amendments mandate 33.3% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions; proof of concept established at the sub-national level                                                                                           |
| 1996 | Lapsed          | Constitution (81st Amendment) Bill introduced; referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee; lapses with the dissolution of Parliament                                                                                                         |
| 1998 | Lapsed          | Re-introduced; lapses again with dissolution                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 1999 | Lapsed          | Re-introduced for the third time; lapses again with dissolution                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 2008 | Stalled         | Re-introduction faces organised parliamentary opposition; referred to a Standing Committee                                                                                                                                                    |
| 2010 | Partial         | 108th Amendment Bill passes the Rajya Sabha (9 March); the Lok Sabha never votes on it; lapses in 2014 and again in 2019                                                                                                                      |
| 2023 | <b>ENACTED</b>  | Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (106th Amendment) passed: Lok Sabha 454–2; Rajya Sabha 214–0. Implementation linked to forthcoming census and delimitation exercise                                                                              |
| 2026 | <b>DEFEATED</b> | <b>Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill 2026, introduced to operationalise the 2023 Act, defeated in the Lok Sabha, falling short of the required two-thirds majority. A constitutionally mandated law remains without operational effect.</b> |

Source: Author’s compilation based on Parliament of India records; Ministry of Law and Justice; LiveLaw (2026, reported); NUS Institute of South Asian Studies (2026).

**Figure 4: Timeline of Women’s Reservation Bill Attempts, 1987 to 2026**



Source: Author’s compilation based on Parliament of India records.

Two structural observations emerge from this record. First, when women’s reservation has been put to a direct, unencumbered vote in Parliament, it has commanded near-unanimous support. The 454-to-2 vote in the Lok Sabha and the 214-to-0 vote in the Rajya Sabha on the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam are not equivocal outcomes; they represent the most decisive expression of parliamentary consensus on any constitutional amendment in recent Indian legislative history. Second, the legislation has consistently failed not on its merits but when it has been procedurally coupled with other contested political demands, including sub-categorisation of quotas, census requirements, and delimitation preconditions. The lesson of four decades is clear: women’s reservation commands legislative supermajorities when it stands alone, and it fails when structural complexity is introduced as a procedural obstacle.

## 6. The Governance Argument: Evidence on Representation and Policy Outcomes

The case for women’s parliamentary reservation is frequently framed as a matter of rights and historical justice. These grounds are independently sufficient. However, the governance literature provides a substantial and growing body of evidence that the argument from justice and the argument from effectiveness are not merely compatible; they are mutually reinforcing.

Research compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2019) indicates that legislative chambers with higher proportions of women members are systematically more likely to advance legislation in the areas of public health, child welfare, primary and secondary education, and social protection. A 2020 study by McKinsey Global Institute found that gender-diverse decision-making bodies demonstrate improved performance on complex policy challenges relative to more homogeneous bodies, a finding consistent with the broader organisational diversity literature (Page, 2007). The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2024) identifies a consistent cross-country correlation between political gender parity and superior performance on composite human development indices, though the causal direction of this relationship continues to be investigated.

The most directly relevant evidence for the Indian case is generated by the natural experiment provided by the 73rd Amendment's mandated reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004), in a landmark study of West Bengal and Rajasthan gram panchayats, demonstrated that villages with randomly assigned women pradhans invested significantly more in public goods related to drinking water, roads, and sanitation than those with male pradhans, even controlling for observable village characteristics. These differences in investment allocations were not attributable to pre-existing differences in women's preferences between reserved and non-reserved constituencies; they were the product of the reservation policy itself. Beaman et al. (2012), studying West Bengal specifically, found that exposure to a female pradhan raised the educational aspirations of adolescent girls and reduced the gender gap in aspirations, providing direct evidence of the symbolic representation effect operating through local governance institutions.

These findings carry material implications for the national-level debate. If the mechanism by which women's representation in gram panchayats produces superior public goods outcomes and intergenerational aspiration effects operates through the structural fact of women's decision-making authority rather than through any idiosyncratic feature of local governance, there is no principled basis for assuming that the same mechanism would not operate at the level of national legislative institutions. India aspires to achieve the status of a Viksit Bharat by 2047, the centenary of independence. That vision requires the full mobilisation of all available human capital, institutional capacity, and policy intelligence. A Parliament in which fewer than one in seven members is a woman is structurally limited in its capacity to achieve that mobilisation.

## 7. The Economic Case: Women's Representation as a Development Imperative

The economic argument for women's parliamentary reservation operates at three analytically distinct but empirically interconnected levels: the macroeconomic level, at which aggregate GDP effects of gender gaps in labour force participation are estimated; the institutional level, at which the evidence on gender diversity in decision-making bodies is assessed; and the microeconomic level, at which household and community-level evidence from India's own developmental experience is examined. Each level independently supports the conclusion that India's current level of women's political exclusion constitutes a measurable economic cost. Taken together, they constitute a development imperative.

### 7.1 Human Capital Theory and the Representational Dividend

Human capital theory (Becker, 1964; Mincer, 1974) holds that the productive capacity of an economy is a function of the education, skills, and health of its working population. An economy that systematically excludes a demographically large segment of its educated workforce from positions of productive and decision-making authority incurs a human capital loss that is

not offset by the productivity of the included segment alone. This principle applies at the level of firms, at the level of institutions, and at the level of national legislatures.

India's higher education system has undergone a significant feminisation over the past two decades. Female enrolment in higher education has grown substantially, and women now constitute the majority of graduates in several disciplines including medicine, law, and certain fields of engineering and natural sciences (AISHE, 2022). India is, in consequence, producing educated, qualified, and professionally credentialled women at an unprecedented rate. The gap between the scale of this educational investment and the current level of women's participation in Parliament and in the formal labour force represents one of the most significant untapped productivity dividends available to any major economy. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development estimates that gender parity in labour market participation in OECD countries would raise GDP by approximately 12 per cent over a twenty-year horizon (OECD, 2012); the IMF's India-specific estimate of 25 per cent reflects the larger baseline gap in female labour force participation that India currently records.

## 7.2 The Macroeconomic Case: Female Labour Force Participation and GDP

India's female labour force participation rate (FLFP) stood at approximately 35 per cent in 2023–24, according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey, reflecting a partial recovery from a decade-long decline but remaining among the lowest rates for any comparable economy. By contrast, FLFP rates in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and China range from 50 to 70 per cent. China's FLFP exceeds 60 per cent; Vietnam's exceeds 70 per cent. The structural gap between India's female labour force participation and these comparator economies represents a persistent drag on aggregate productive capacity.

The International Monetary Fund (2018) estimated that closing the gender gap in labour force participation in India could add approximately 25 per cent to GDP. This is not a theoretical extrapolation; it is a demand-side estimate grounded in demographic and sector-specific labour market modelling. The International Labour Organisation (2017) has projected that eliminating gender-based barriers to labour force participation at scale could add USD 12 trillion to global GDP, with a disproportionate share of the potential gain concentrated in economies with the largest existing participation gaps, of which India is among the most significant.

The IMF estimates that closing India's gender gap in labour force participation could add approximately 25 per cent to GDP — one of the largest untapped macroeconomic dividends available to any major economy.

The mechanism through which women's political representation connects to labour force participation is not merely correlational. Beaman et al. (2012) demonstrate, through a randomised natural experiment in West Bengal, that girls in constituencies represented by a woman *pradhan* under the Panchayati Raj reservation are significantly more likely to aspire to employment outside the home. This representational signalling effect — the documented tendency of descriptive representation to alter aspirations and behaviour among members of the represented group — constitutes a plausible and empirically supported causal pathway from legislative gender diversity to aggregate labour force outcomes. A Parliament that better represents women sends a signal to the labour market, to educational institutions, to families, and to women themselves that positions of authority in India are available to women. That signal has measurable effects on female labour force participation rates.

## 7.3 Gender Diversity in Decision-Making Institutions

The literature on organisational diversity and decision-making performance is extensive and methodologically varied, but its principal findings are consistent. Page (2007), in a foundational theoretical treatment, demonstrates that cognitively diverse groups — those composed of individuals with different informational backgrounds and problem-solving frameworks — systematically outperform homogeneous groups of equal or higher individual ability on complex problems. The mechanism is not preference-based; it is epistemic. Diverse groups access a larger solution space.

McKinsey Global Institute (2020) finds, in a study of over 1,000 companies across fifteen countries, that organisations in the top quartile for gender diversity are 25 per cent more likely to achieve above-average profitability than those in the bottom quartile, and that this effect is robust across industry sectors and economic cycles. Credit Suisse Research Institute (2016) finds that large-cap companies with at least one woman on their board of directors have delivered superior stock price performance relative to those without over a ten-year horizon. These findings, generated in corporate contexts, are not directly transferable to legislative institutions, but they are consistent with the more limited literature on gender diversity in legislatures (Wangnerud, 2009; Htun and Weldon, 2018), which finds that women legislators introduce different legislative agendas and generate superior legislative outcomes on policy domains that are underserved in male-dominated chambers.

The implication for India's Parliament is straightforward. A legislative body in which fewer than one in seven members is a woman is not accessing the full range of informational and experiential inputs available to its electorate. The policy decisions produced by such a body — on public health, education, labour markets, agricultural development, urban planning, and social protection — are, on the available evidence, likely to be less comprehensive and less effectively implemented than those produced by a more gender-diverse legislature.

## 7.4 Self-Help Groups and the Evidence from India's Grassroots Financial Architecture

India's Self-Help Group (SHG) movement constitutes one of the most significant grassroots financial networks in the world, and it is overwhelmingly led by women. As of 2023, more than ten million SHGs link in excess of 120 million women to formal credit, savings, and livelihood support systems (NABARD, 2023). The microfinance literature, drawing on decades of lending data from South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America, consistently records higher loan repayment rates, lower default rates, and stronger household income outcomes among women borrowers relative to comparable male cohorts (Armendáriz de Aghion and Morduch, 2005). Financial inclusion programmes across the developing world have been structured around women precisely because the household-, community-, and national-level returns are consistently superior.

The SHG movement demonstrates, at scale, that Indian women are not passive recipients of development interventions but active economic agents capable of building and sustaining complex financial institutions. A Parliament that more fully represents women is more likely to recognise, extend, and appropriately resource this institutional architecture. Policy interventions that build on the SHG model — including digital financial inclusion, rural livelihood programmes, and microenterprise development — are more likely to be well-designed and effectively targeted where women legislators participate in their design.

## 7.5 The Viksit Bharat 2047 Imperative

India's aspiration to achieve the status of a developed economy by 2047, the centenary of independence, requires the mobilisation of every available productive resource within a twenty-

one year window. The IMF's 25 per cent GDP estimate is not a background consideration in this context; it is a central variable in any realistic modelling of what the Viksit Bharat trajectory requires. An economy that enters its centenary development sprint with approximately 35 per cent female labour force participation, a gender gap in entrepreneurship of comparable magnitude, and a legislative chamber in which women hold fewer than 15 per cent of seats is not deploying its full productive capacity.

The pathway from current women's parliamentary representation levels to the constitutional 33 per cent mandate, and from 35 per cent FLFP to the 70 per cent rates that characterise comparator economies, involves a series of mutually reinforcing policy and institutional changes. Legislative reservation is not the only element of this pathway, but it is a structurally necessary one. When women hold legislative authority, the evidence from India's own Panchayati Raj experience indicates that public investment priorities shift toward goods that expand women's productive participation: drinking water infrastructure, which reduces the time burden on women disproportionately; rural road connectivity, which expands women's access to markets and employment; and sanitation, which affects girls' school retention rates. These are not peripheral development concerns; they are foundational prerequisites for the human capital accumulation that the Viksit Bharat vision requires.

Table 7 provides a structured summary of the principal bodies of economic evidence relevant to the case for women's parliamentary reservation, including the source, finding, jurisdiction of primary data, and relevance to the Indian context.

**Table 7: Summary of Economic Evidence Supporting Women's Parliamentary Representation**

| Study / Source                   | Finding                                                                                                         | Jurisdiction                      | Relevance to India                                                                  |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| IMF (2018)                       | Closing the gender gap in labour force participation could increase GDP by approximately 25%                    | India-specific estimate           | Directly applicable: India's FLFP stands at approx. 35%, well below comparators     |
| McKinsey Global Institute (2020) | Companies in the top quartile for gender diversity are 25% more likely to achieve above-average profitability   | Multi-country                     | Applies to legislative and executive decision-making bodies                         |
| World Bank (2012)                | Each additional year of secondary education for girls raises future wages by 10–20%                             | Global                            | India's rising female enrolment signals an imminent human capital dividend          |
| Beaman et al. (2012)             | Female political leaders in India significantly raised educational aspirations of girls in their constituencies | India (West Bengal)               | Direct evidence of representational signalling effects in the Indian context        |
| Chattopadhyay & Duflo (2004)     | Villages with women pradhans invested significantly more in drinking water and roads                            | India (Rajasthan and West Bengal) | Foundational evidence from Panchayati Raj; potentially replicable at national level |
| NABARD (2023)                    | Over 10 million Self-Help Groups link 120+ million women to formal credit                                       | India                             | Demonstrates institutional capacity of women as financial agents at scale           |

|                             |                                                                                                      |               |                                                                               |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                             | and livelihood programmes                                                                            |               |                                                                               |
| World Economic Forum (2024) | Countries with higher political gender parity consistently score better on human development indices | Multi-country | Suggests systemic co-movement between representation and development outcomes |
| ILO (2017)                  | Increasing female labour force participation to OECD levels would add USD 12 trillion to global GDP  | Global        | Applicable to India's structural reform agenda under Viksit Bharat 2047       |

Sources: IMF (2018); McKinsey Global Institute (2020); World Bank (2012); Beaman et al. (2012); Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004); NABARD (2023); WEF (2024); ILO (2017).

### ECONOMIC SYNTHESIS

The economic case for women's parliamentary reservation in India operates simultaneously at the macroeconomic level (an estimated 25% GDP gain from closing the FLFP gap), the institutional level (documented governance efficiency gains from gender-diverse decision-making bodies), and the community level (superior public goods outcomes from women-led Panchayati Raj institutions). These are not mutually exclusive arguments; they are complementary and reinforcing. Women's parliamentary representation is not a welfare expenditure. It is a productivity investment with among the highest measurable returns available to the Indian economy.

## 8. The Constitutional Case: What the Law Already Commands

The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam is not a statutory instrument subject to ordinary parliamentary modification; it is a constitutional amendment. The Constitution (106th Amendment) Act 2023 inserted Articles 330A and 332A into the Constitution of India, mandating a minimum of one-third reservation of total Lok Sabha seats for women. These articles are operative constitutional provisions carrying the full normative and legal weight of any other provision of the Constitution.

The implementation clause of Article 330A links operationalisation to a post-census delimitation exercise. The stated purpose of this conditionality was to ensure that constituencies used for the application of reservation are defined on the basis of updated demographic data. Thirty months following enactment, the census has not been published, delimitation has not been undertaken, and the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill 2026, introduced to establish an implementation pathway independent of this conditionality, has been defeated. The constitutional mandate is, in consequence, indefinitely suspended.

A standalone constitutional amendment implementing the 33 per cent reservation on existing constituencies through a rotational mechanism would be constitutionally valid on at least two independent grounds. First, Article 15(3) of the Constitution specifically empowers Parliament to make special provisions for women and children; this is the same provision under which the 73rd and 74th Amendments mandated women's reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions in 1992, a mechanism that has been operational for over three decades without constitutional challenge. Second, the 106th Amendment defines a minimum standard; it does not preclude a

more immediate implementation mechanism applied to existing constituencies. The constitutional text does not require that reservation be applied exclusively following delimitation; it requires that once implemented, it be maintained. A rotational mechanism applied to the existing 543 Lok Sabha constituencies satisfies this requirement.

### THE WAY FORWARD

A standalone constitutional amendment implementing 33 per cent women's reservation on the existing 543 Lok Sabha constituencies through a rotational mechanism, effective from the next general election. No new census is required. No delimitation is required. No expansion of the House is required. The sole requirement is the political will to implement what Parliament itself has already unanimously endorsed by a margin of 454 to 2. Women's reservation is simultaneously a constitutional obligation, a democratic imperative, and a 25 per cent GDP argument.

## 9. Social Implications of Women's Empowerment: Patrilineal Societies, Multitasking, and the Governance Dividend

Any honest account of women's political empowerment in India must be grounded in an understanding of the social contexts in which Indian women actually live. India's social fabric is characterised by extraordinary diversity, but a significant majority of its communities across religion, region, caste, and tribe are organised on patrilineal principles: descent is traced through the male line, property and family name are transmitted from father to son, and the primary locus of formal social authority traditionally resides in the male head of household or clan. To argue for women's parliamentary reservation without engaging with this social reality is to make a constitutional argument that floats free of its social context. This section argues that the relationship between patrilineal social organisation and women's political empowerment is not one of incompatibility. It is, on the available evidence, one of complementarity. The social capacities that patrilineal communities have historically required of women are precisely the capacities that governance requires. Women's legislative representation does not dismantle traditional social structures; it mobilises the social capital those structures have generated and directs it toward the public good.

### 9.1 India's Patrilineal Social Landscape: Diversity Within Structure

Patrilineal descent systems predominate across the majority of India's social communities. Among the Hindu communities of North and Central India, including Brahmin, Rajput, Jat, Ahir, Kurmi, and most other jati groups, lineage, gotra affiliation, and property succession are transmitted through the male line (Karve, 1953; Dumont, 1970). The gotra system, which governs marriage prohibitions and clan identity across a large proportion of Hindu communities, is itself a patrilineal institution: a woman's gotra changes at marriage to that of her husband's patrilineal clan.

Among India's Scheduled Tribe communities, patrilineal organisation is similarly widespread. The Santhal, Gond, Munda, Oraon, Bhil, Meena, Bodo, Ho, Kharia, and Gondi-speaking communities, spanning the states of Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Assam, are predominantly patrilineal in descent and inheritance (Elwin, 1964; Fuchs, 1973). Among the Northeast's tribal communities, including the Meitei of Manipur, the Naga groups, and the Mizo, patrilineal clan structures govern social organisation, land

rights, and community governance. The principal matrilineal exceptions, the Khasi and Garo of Meghalaya, the Nair community of Kerala (whose traditional marumakkathayam system is now partially displaced by statutory law), and the Bunt community of coastal Karnataka — represent important but demographically limited exceptions within a predominantly patrilineal national landscape.

Most of India’s Muslim communities follow patrilineal principles of descent, inheritance, and family organisation consistent with classical Islamic jurisprudence, including the Hanafi school predominant in South Asia (Fyzee, 1974). Patrilineal organisation is therefore not a feature of any single religious community or regional tradition; it is a cross-cutting structural characteristic of Indian social organisation that spans region, religion, and caste.

Table 8 presents a structured overview of the principal patrilineal community groupings in India, illustrating the breadth of this social organisation and the specific social roles that women have historically performed within these communities.

**Table 8: Patrilineal Communities in India — Social Organisation and Women’s Traditional Roles**

| Community Group                                                                    | Geographic Distribution                                                 | Patrilineal Features                                                                                                                                                                                  | Women’s Traditional Social Roles                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| North Indian Hindu Communities (Brahmin, Rajput, Jat, Ahir, Kurmi, Yadav)          | Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh        | Gotra-based clan identity; patrilineal property succession; village exogamy; patrilocal residence after marriage                                                                                      | Household economic management; agricultural support (transplanting, harvesting, post-harvest processing); preservation and transmission of oral traditions, ritual knowledge, and medicinal practice; management of intra-family social relations                    |
| Tribal Communities — Central India (Santhal, Gond, Munda, Oraon, Bhil, Ho, Kharia) | Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan | Clan (pargana/gotra) based identity transmitted through father; patrilineal land rights in most sub-groups; traditional village governance (gram sabha) historically male-dominated                   | Jhum (shifting) cultivation and forest resource collection; livestock management; transmission of ecological knowledge systems, traditional medicine, and oral histories; market trade in forest and craft products; community health and child nutrition management |
| Tribal Communities — Northeast India (Naga groups, Meitei, Mizo, Bodo, Karbi)      | Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh                    | Patrilineal clan structures governing land rights, village council membership, and ritual authority; village councils (Naga hohos; Mizo zawlbuk tradition) historically exclusively male institutions | Agricultural production (terraced cultivation); weaving and textile production (economic and cultural significance); management of household food security; cultural preservation through oral narrative and textile symbolism; community social cohesion networks   |

|                                                                              |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| North Indian Muslim Communities (across multiple states)                     | Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Assam, Kashmir | Patrilineal nasab (lineage); biradari (clan brotherhood) social networks; patrilocal residence; inheritance broadly following Hanafi principles with male preference in land distribution | Management of household economy and food systems; education and socialisation of children; maintenance of kinship networks across biradari; participation in informal credit and savings circles; artisanal production (zardozi, chikankari, weaving) with significant economic contribution |
| South and West Indian Communities (Brahmin, Lingayat, Reddy, Maratha, Bania) | Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, Gujarat   | Patrilineal descent and gotra system; patrilineal property succession (subject to Hindu Succession Act amendments); largely patrilocal after marriage                                     | Agricultural management; management of family enterprise finances in trading communities (Bania, Marwari); educational decisions for children; participation in neighbourhood and temple-based social networks; health and nutrition management within extended family systems               |

Source: Author's compilation based on Karve (1953); Dumont (1970); Elwin (1964); Fuchs (1973); Fyze (1974); Census of India (2011); Anthropological Survey of India records.

## 9.2 The Efficiency and Social Coherence of Patrilineal Organisation

Patrilineal social systems are not adequately characterised as simple structures of male dominance. They are complex social organisational frameworks that have evolved over extended periods to perform specific and demonstrably functional roles: the unambiguous transmission of property rights across generations, the maintenance of community solidarity through clan networks, the efficient allocation of labour within ecologically demanding productive systems, and the preservation of cultural, linguistic, and ecological knowledge through structured inter-generational transmission.

The property rights function of patrilineal organisation is analytically significant. Clear succession rules — property passing to identified male heirs within a defined lineage — reduce transaction costs in land markets, minimise the frequency and severity of inter-generational inheritance disputes, and create the conditions for long-term investment in land improvement and productivity (Platteau, 2000). In agricultural communities where land is the primary productive asset, this predictability has historically provided economic stability that more fluid inheritance systems do not always generate. The Hindu Succession Act amendments of 2005, which extended equal inheritance rights to daughters, represent an important statutory evolution; but they operate within, rather than replacing, communities whose social organisation remains largely patrilineal in structure.

The community solidarity function of patrilineal clan organisation is equally significant. The gotra, kul, pargana, and biradari systems of North, Central, and Northwest India function as mutual aid networks that provide social insurance against individual household shocks — crop failure, illness, bereavement, dispute — within a framework of reciprocal obligation defined by shared patrilineal identity (Mayer, 1960; Kolenda, 1978). This embedded social insurance function has historically substituted, imperfectly but substantially, for formal welfare institutions. In tribal communities of Central and Northeast India, patrilineal clan structures perform

analogous functions of collective resource management, conflict resolution, and ecological stewardship that have been documented in the anthropological literature as models of effective common-pool resource governance (Elwin, 1964; Gadgil and Guha, 1992).

The lifestyle and ecological dimensions of patrilineal community organisation are also relevant. Many tribal and rural patrilineal communities maintain ways of life characterised by high levels of physical activity, close integration with natural resource systems, traditional food practices based on local agricultural and forest products, strong intergenerational bonds, and community-level social cohesion that provides psychological security and belonging. The Santhal, Gond, and Munda communities, for instance, have maintained sophisticated agroforestry systems and medicinal plant knowledge bases transmitted through clan structures over generations. These are not merely anthropological curiosities; they represent forms of social and ecological capital with significant bearing on public health, nutritional security, and environmental sustainability — precisely the policy domains where women's political representation is documented to have the greatest effect on legislative priorities (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004). Patrilineal communities are not simply structures of male authority. They are repositories of social capital, ecological knowledge, and community solidarity — capital that women have sustained and transmitted across generations, and that women legislators are best positioned to translate into effective public policy.

### 9.3 Women as the Hidden Pillars of Patrilineal Social Reproduction

The formal authority structures of patrilineal communities are predominantly male. The substantive work of social reproduction — the daily, seasonal, and generational labour that maintains community cohesion, transmits cultural knowledge, ensures household food security, manages community health, and sustains the social networks through which patrilineal solidarity is actualised — is performed predominantly by women. This is not a peripheral observation. It is a structural fact about how patrilineal communities actually function, as distinct from how their formal authority hierarchies are organised.

In agricultural patrilineal communities, women manage household food systems from production through storage, processing, and preparation. They make the dietary decisions that determine child nutrition outcomes. They manage the medicinal knowledge systems that constitute primary healthcare in communities with limited institutional access. They maintain the kinship networks — relations with the natal family (*maika*) and the marital family (*sasural*) — that create the bilateral social connectivity within which patrilineal communities are embedded. They transmit oral traditions, ritual knowledge, and craft techniques that constitute community cultural identity. In tribal communities, women frequently perform the majority of agricultural labour while also managing forest resource collection — fuel wood, non-timber forest products, water — that sustains household economies (Agarwal, 1994).

This combination of responsibilities constitutes, in practice, a demanding form of multi-domain management that is performed simultaneously and continuously. A woman in a patrilineal farming community in Jharkhand or Rajasthan does not sequence her responsibilities; she manages household nutrition, agricultural participation, community social relations, child health and education, and economic micro-enterprise in parallel, adapting priorities in real time to the demands of each domain. This is not a romanticisation of rural women's lives, which frequently involve physical hardship and limited autonomy. It is an accurate characterisation of the cognitive and social demands that patrilineal community structures place on women, and a recognition that meeting those demands develops capacities of direct relevance to governance.

### 9.4 Multitasking as a Governance Asset: The Social Capital Thesis

The multitasking capacity that patrilineal social structures have historically demanded of women represents a governance asset of significant and largely unrecognised magnitude. Contemporary cognitive science and organisational behaviour research establishes that the ability to maintain awareness of multiple simultaneous domains, allocate attention adaptively across competing priorities, integrate information from heterogeneous sources, and sustain long-term relational networks are the defining competencies of effective governance at any level of institutional complexity (Buser and Peter, 2012; Eagly and Carli, 2007).

These are precisely the capacities that patrilineal community life has required of women. The woman who simultaneously manages household food security, participates in agricultural production, maintains bilateral kinship networks, cares for young children and elderly parents, and participates in community self-help institutions has demonstrated, in daily practice, a form of multi-domain management that is directly analogous to the demands of legislative service. She has managed competing priorities, allocated limited resources under uncertainty, maintained complex social relationships, and made decisions with consequences for multiple dependents. She has done this without institutional support, without staff, and without recognition.

The evidence from India's own Panchayati Raj institutions reinforces this inference. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) document that women pradhans in West Bengal and Rajasthan not only delivered superior public goods outcomes but did so while navigating the social constraints of patrilineal communities — managing the expectations of male elders, the scepticism of male colleagues, and the competing demands of household responsibilities. The governance effectiveness documented in that study was not achieved in spite of these social constraints; it was achieved through the social navigation capacities that those constraints had themselves developed. Similarly, Beaman et al. (2012) document that the positive aspiration effects of women's panchayat leadership on girls in their constituencies were largest in villages with stronger pre-existing patrilineal social norms, suggesting that representational signalling is most powerful precisely where structural barriers have been highest.

The social network capital that women accumulate through patrilineal community structures — deep knowledge of household circumstances, family health situations, children's educational trajectories, intra-community disputes, and economic constraints — translates directly into the evidentiary base for evidence-driven policy-making. A woman legislator from a patrilineal tribal community in Odisha or Jharkhand does not need a consultant's report to understand the ground realities of forest rights, primary healthcare access, girls' school retention, or the economics of non-timber forest product collection in her constituency. She has lived those realities and maintained the social networks through which they are transmitted. This is an informational advantage of the first order, and it is one that the current composition of Parliament systematically excludes.

## 9.5 Complementarity, Not Conflict: Women's Empowerment Within Patrilineal Frameworks

The most important social implication of women's parliamentary empowerment in a predominantly patrilineal society is that it need not be understood as a confrontation with traditional social structures. The dichotomy frequently assumed — between women's political empowerment and the preservation of patrilineal community values — is a false one. The evidence from Panchayati Raj institutions, from tribal women's participation in community governance, and from the careers of women legislators who have emerged from patrilineal communities suggests a fundamentally different relationship: one of complementarity.

Women legislators from patrilineal communities, whether tribal women elected from Scheduled Tribe constituencies in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha, or women MPs from Rajput or Jat communities in Rajasthan and Haryana, do not typically seek to dismantle the social structures within which they have been formed. They seek, in documented practice, to address

the specific failures of those structures: the exclusion of women from property inheritance, the gap in girls' educational provision, the absence of maternal health infrastructure, the inadequacy of drinking water access, and the lack of formal recognition for the economic contributions that women make within patrilineal household economies. These are reform priorities that strengthen patrilineal communities by extending the formal recognition and institutional support they require to function effectively in a modern developmental state.

The career of Draupadi Murmu, who served as a legislator in the Odisha state assembly before assuming the Presidency, illustrates this complementarity concretely. Murmu emerged from the Santhal community, one of India's largest patrilineal tribal groups. Her legislative priorities consistently addressed the specific developmental needs of Scheduled Tribe communities, including forest rights, land protection, and educational access, without seeking to dismantle the clan-based social structures through which Santhal community identity and solidarity are maintained. Her trajectory is not exceptional; it is representative of a pattern in which women legislators from patrilineal communities serve as advocates for the community's developmental interests while simultaneously demonstrating, through their own authority, that women's leadership is a legitimate and effective expression of community values rather than a departure from them. The signal that women's legislative representation sends within patrilineal communities is therefore not a signal of cultural disruption. It is a signal that the community's women who have always been its most essential social and productive workers are now recognised as its governance representatives as well. That recognition, repeated across 33 per cent of Lok Sabha constituencies under the proposed reservation, would constitute a social transformation of substantial magnitude: one that operates not by negating patrilineal social organisation but by extending full civic recognition to the women who have sustained it.

## 9.6 From Household to Parliament: The Multitasking Multiplier and National Social Development

The cumulative argument of this section is that women's entry into Parliament from India's patrilineal communities represents not a transfer of individuals from social contexts into alien institutional roles, but a transfer of the social, cognitive, and experiential capital that those contexts have developed into institutions that currently lack it. The multitasking capacity, the community knowledge networks, the sensitivity to household-level developmental constraints, and the understanding of how patrilineal social structures interact with public policy — these are assets that 543 male-dominated constituencies currently exclude from the national legislative process.

The policy implications are concrete. Women legislators from patrilineal communities are more likely to prioritise legislation that addresses the specific intersection of traditional social organisation and developmental deficit: the recognition of women's customary land rights within patrilineal systems, the provision of maternal health infrastructure sensitive to the social geography of patrilocal communities, the design of nutritional programmes that build on traditional food knowledge rather than displacing it, and the development of educational models that respect tribal and community cultural contexts while expanding girls' access to formal schooling. These are not ideological positions; they are evidence-based policy preferences documented in the Panchayati Raj literature (Rao, 2015; Agarwal, 2010) and in the comparative legislative behaviour literature (Wangnerud, 2009; Htun and Weldon, 2018).

India's patrilineal communities, from the tribal heartlands of Central India to the agrarian societies of the Indo-Gangetic Plain to the clan-based communities of the Northeast, have produced women of extraordinary resilience, social intelligence, ecological knowledge, and governance capability. These women have managed complexity, sustained communities, transmitted culture, and built social capital across generations, without any formal institutional recognition of their contribution. The Parliament of India has the capacity to change that. Women's

reservation is not only a constitutional obligation and an economic dividend; it is a recognition, long overdue, that the women of India's patrilineal communities have been governing their communities informally for generations. It is time to give them the formal authority that their capacity has always warranted.

### SOCIAL SYNTHESIS

India's patrilineal communities — encompassing the majority of its tribal, Hindu, and Muslim social groups — have generated women of demonstrated social capital, multi-tasking capacity, ecological knowledge, and community leadership. The efficiency, cohesion, and intergenerational continuity of patrilineal social organisation rest substantially on the invisible labour of women. Women's parliamentary representation does not threaten this social order. It extends formal governance authority to those who have always exercised informal governance responsibility — and in doing so, directs the resulting social capital toward the design of public policy that is more informed, more inclusive, and more effective.

## 10. Conclusion: The Constitutional Debt That Cannot Be Deferred

This article has examined the case for women's parliamentary reservation in India across six analytically distinct but mutually reinforcing dimensions: the historical record, the electoral data, the comparative international evidence, the governance literature, the economic evidence base, and the social implications of empowerment within India's predominantly patrilineal social landscape. The findings across each dimension converge on a common conclusion.

Historically, India's civilisational record establishes a continuous tradition of women's intellectual leadership, administrative authority, and military command extending from the Vedic period to the independence movement and into the highest offices of the post-independence Republic. The argument that Indian women are unprepared for legislative authority at the national level is contradicted by this record in its entirety.

Empirically, seventy-two years of election data establish that the organic rate of growth in women's parliamentary representation is inadequate, by any reasonable projection methodology, to achieve the constitutionally mandated 33 per cent threshold within any defensible democratic timeframe. Under historical trend assumptions, that threshold would not be reached until 2214. The 2024 election, the first conducted following the enactment of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, produced a decline in the absolute number of women MPs, further demonstrating that constitutional enactment without operationalisation is without practical effect.

Comparatively, India records lower women's parliamentary representation than the global average, lower than the South Asian average, lower than Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal, and far lower than the international benchmark set by countries that have successfully implemented gender quotas. No country that has implemented women's parliamentary quotas has conditioned operationalisation on a prior census and delimitation exercise. India's conditionality clause is, on the comparative evidence, without democratic precedent.

From a governance perspective, the evidence from India's own Panchayati Raj institutions, and from the comparative governance literature, indicates that women's political representation in decision-making bodies is associated with superior public goods outcomes, more inclusive policy priorities, and measurable intergenerational aspiration effects among girls and young women. These findings are not marginal or contested; they constitute some of the strongest empirical findings in the political economy literature on gender and development.

Economically, the case for women's reservation is among the most robust available to India's development strategy. The IMF's estimate that closing the gender gap in labour force participation could add approximately 25 per cent to India's GDP represents the single largest available macroeconomic dividend that is not contingent on technological innovation, external capital inflows, or terms-of-trade improvements. It requires the removal of structural barriers — in governance, in signalling, in public investment priorities of precisely the kind that women's parliamentary representation is documented to facilitate.

Socially, the patrilineal communities that constitute the majority of India's social fabric have generated women of extraordinary resilience, social capital, and governance experience. The efficiency, cohesion, and intergenerational continuity of patrilineal social organisation from the gotra-based communities of North India to the clan structures of Central Indian tribal societies to the biradari networks of Muslim communities rest substantially on the invisible, unrecognised, and unrewarded labour of women. The multitasking capacity developed by women who simultaneously manage household food security, agricultural production, community social networks, child health and education, and micro-enterprise participation is a governance asset of the first order. Women's parliamentary representation does not dismantle the social order of patrilineal communities; it mobilises the social capital those communities have generated in women, and directs it toward the design of public policy that is more informed, more socially embedded, and more effectively implemented. The multitasking multiplier, the demonstrated capacity of women legislators to address a broader range of developmental priorities simultaneously, is in significant measure a product of the social demands that India's patrilineal communities have placed on their women. Parliament has the capacity to harness this multiplier. It is long past time to do so.

The constitutional case is the simplest of all. The Constitution (106th Amendment) Act 2023 is the supreme law of India. It was enacted by a Parliament that voted 454 to 2 and 214 to 0. It mandates a minimum of 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha. It has not been implemented. A legislature that enacts a constitutional mandate and then defeats the legislation required to operationalise it has produced an outcome that is constitutionally anomalous at best and constitutionally indefensible at worst.

India's women have not waited passively. They have argued, governed, built, and led at every level of this country's history. They do not need to be prepared for Parliament. They have been ready since 1947. What has not been ready is Parliament's institutional architecture.

The women of India did not fight for independence in order to be allocated fewer than 15 per cent of the seats in the Parliament of the independent state they helped create. From Gargi Vachaknavi's philosophical debates in the Vedic period to Aruna Asaf Ali's defiance at Gowalia Tank Maidan, from Indira Gandhi's administration of a nuclear-armed state to Draupadi Murmu's assumption of the Presidency, the record of Indian women's public leadership is one of the longest, most varied, and most distinguished in the history of any democracy.

The legislative pathway is clear: a standalone constitutional amendment implementing 33 per cent reservation on existing Lok Sabha constituencies through a rotational mechanism, effective from the next general election. It requires no census. It requires no delimitation. It requires only the legislative will to implement what Parliament itself has already unanimously endorsed.

The constitutional, historical, moral, economic, and social arguments presented in this article are not competing claims; they are complementary ones. Each is independently sufficient to

justify implementation. Together, they constitute an obligation that admits of no further deferral. The question before Parliament is not whether to implement women's reservation. It is whether the institutional architecture of India's democracy will finally honour the women who built it — the women who debated philosophy in Vedic assemblies, who governed empires, who held the independence movement together, who administered states, who managed households and farms and forests and communities, and who have been ready to govern this nation since before the nation itself declared its readiness to be free.

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