



United International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (UIJMR)

An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN: 3048-6726 www.ujmr.in Impact Factor: 6.934 (SJIF) Vol-3, Issue-1 ; Jan, Feb & Mar, 2026

The History of the Women's Reservation Bill in India: Evolution, Debates, and Constitutional Journey

Smt. Vanaja Yarikipati

Lecturer in Political Science, Government Degree College for Women, Madanapalle, Mobile: 9908946622, Mail id: yvanaja2@gmail.com

Article Received: 10-01-2026 Article Modified: 28-01-2026

Article Accepted: 29-01-2026 Article Published: 30-01-2026

DOI: 10.37854/UIJMR.2026.3.1.272

Abstract

The Women's Reservation Bill represents one of the most significant constitutional reform initiatives in India's democratic history. Conceived to address the chronic underrepresentation of women in legislative institutions, the proposal sought to reserve one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for women. Despite repeated attempts over nearly three decades, the Bill remained stalled due to political disagreements regarding sub-quotas and electoral representation. The eventual enactment of the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, marked a historic milestone in India's constitutional and democratic evolution. This article traces the historical development of women's political reservation, examining its constitutional foundations, legislative trajectory, major debates, judicial perspectives, and implications for representative democracy.

Keywords: Women's Reservation Bill, Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, Political Representation, Gender Justice, Constitutional Amendment, India, Electoral Reform

1. Introduction

Women's equal participation in political decision-making is a fundamental principle of democratic governance. Although India granted universal adult franchise immediately after Independence in 1950, women have remained significantly underrepresented in legislative institutions. While women constitute nearly half of India's population, their representation in Parliament remained below 15 percent for most of the post-independence period.

Recognizing this democratic deficit, successive governments proposed reserving one-third of legislative seats for women. The Women's Reservation Bill became one of the longest pending



United International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (UIJMR)

An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN: 3048-6726 www.ujmr.in Impact Factor: 6.934 (SJIF) Vol-3, Issue-1 ;Jan, Feb & Mar, 2026

constitutional reforms in independent India, taking almost twenty-seven years from its first introduction in Parliament to its eventual enactment in 2023.

2. Historical Background

Women in the Freedom Movement

The demand for women's political participation predates Independence. Women actively participated in the national movement under leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Kasturba Gandhi, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kripalani, Vijayalakshmi Pandit. These leaders argued that political independence would remain incomplete without women's equal participation in governance.

Constituent Assembly Debates

The Constituent Assembly (1946–1949) debated whether reservations should be provided for women. Prominent women members including Hansa Mehta, Durgabai Deshmukh, Renuka Ray, Ammu Swaminathan had generally opposed special political reservations, believing that universal adult franchise and constitutional equality would enable women to compete equally with men. Consequently, the Constitution guaranteed the important provisions like Equality before law (Article 14), Prohibition of discrimination (Article 15), Equality of opportunity (Article 16), Universal Adult Suffrage (Article 326), without creating legislative reservations for women.

3. Declining Representation after Independence

Despite constitutional guarantees, women's representation remained low. The below table represents the trends in the representation of women in the consecutive general elections despite of constitutional rights and legal protections.

Lok Sabha	Women MPs	Percentage
First (1952)	22	4.4%
Fourth (1967)	31	5.9%
Eighth (1984)	44	8.1%
Twelfth (1998)	43	7.9%
Fifteenth (2009)	59	10.8%
Seventeenth (2019)	78	14.4%

Political parties rarely nominated women candidates, limiting opportunities despite equal voting rights and many other reasons also contributed for the inadequate levels of women representation.



United International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (UIJMR)

An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN: 3048-6726 www.ujmr.in Impact Factor: 6.934 (SJIF) Vol-3, Issue-1 ; Jan, Feb & Mar, 2026

4. International Developments

During the 1970s and 1980s, international organizations increasingly emphasized women's political empowerment. Important milestones included:

- 1975 International Women's Year
- UN Decade for Women (1976–1985)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1979
- Beijing Platform for Action, 1995

These developments influenced Indian policymakers toward affirmative political measures.

5. The National Perspective Plan (1988)

The National Perspective Plan for Women (1988–2000) recommended:

- 30% reservation for women
- Greater representation in decision-making institutions
- Political empowerment through constitutional reforms

This became the intellectual foundation for subsequent reservation policies.

6. Local Government Reservation: A Turning Point

The most significant breakthrough came through decentralization reforms.

73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992)

Reservation in:

- Gram Panchayats
- Panchayat Samitis
- Zilla Parishads

provided:

- One-third reservation for women
- Reservation for SC/ST women
- Rotation of reserved constituencies

74th Constitutional Amendment (1992)

Extended similar reservations to Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils and Nagar Panchayats. These reforms transformed women's political participation at the grassroots. Today more than **1.4 million women** serve in Panchayati Raj Institutions, making India one of the largest experiments in women's political representation.

7. Origin of the Women's Reservation Bill

Encouraged by the success of local government reservations, the demand shifted to Parliament and State Assemblies.



United International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (UIJMR)

An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN: 3048-6726 www.ujmr.in Impact Factor: 6.934 (SJIF) Vol-3, Issue-1 ; Jan, Feb & Mar, 2026

The objective was:

- 33% reservation in Lok Sabha
- 33% reservation in State Legislative Assemblies
- Reservation within SC/ST seats for women
- Rotation after every election

8. Legislative History of the Bill

The Women's Reservation Bill, officially known as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, became a reality when it passed the Lok Sabha on September 20, 2023, by a margin of 454 to 2 votes. It mandates a 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies, but will only take effect after the next delimitation exercise following a census.

The journey of this legislation was incredibly turbulent, taking 27 years to clear the Lower House:

- **The Early Attempts (1996–2003):** First introduced in the Lok Sabha on September 12, 1996, by the United Front government, the bill lapsed because parliamentary committees could not reach a consensus. Subsequent coalition governments attempted to reintroduce the bill in 1998, 1999, 2002, and 2003, but they all failed due to intense opposition and physical scuffles in the House.
- **The Rajya Sabha Hurdle (2008–2010):** The bill found a new path when it was introduced in the Rajya Sabha in 2008 by the UPA government. It was finally passed by the Upper House on March 9, 2010. However, it was not taken up by the Lok Sabha and eventually lapsed when the 15th Lok Sabha dissolved in 2014.
- **Historic Passage (2023):** After years of stagnation, the bill was reintroduced in the Lok Sabha on September 19, 2023, during a special session held in the new Parliament building. Passed overwhelmingly the next day, it subsequently cleared the Rajya Sabha unanimously on September 21. It was signed into law by President Droupadi Murmu as the 106th Constitutional Amendment on September 28, 2023.

9. Major Provisions of the 2023 Act

The **Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam** (The Constitution 106th Amendment Act) mandates a 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies, and the Delhi Legislative Assembly.

Major Provisions

- **33% Seat Reservation:** Reserves one-third of all seats for women in direct elections to legislative bodies.



United International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (UIJMR)

An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN: 3048-6726 www.ujmr.in Impact Factor: 6.934 (SJIF) Vol-3, Issue-1 ; Jan, Feb & Mar, 2026

-
- **SC/ST Sub-Quota:** Includes a mandatory 33% quota for women within the existing seats reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).
 - **15-Year Validity:** Sets an initial sunset clause of 15 years, which Parliament can extend through future legislation.
 - **Rotational Seats:** Mandates that reserved seats will be rotated to different constituencies after each subsequent delimitation exercise.
 - **Delayed Implementation:** Links the activation of the law to the completion of the next official census and the subsequent delimitation (boundary drawing) exercise.

Major Debates on the Act:

- **Gender Parity:** Accelerates women's political representation, moving India away from its historically low (~14%) female representation in Parliament.
- **Policy Inclusivity:** Breaks the "glass ceiling" in top-tier policymaking, leading to governance that better addresses healthcare, education, and gender-based violence.
- **Proven Local Success:** Builds on the successful track record of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which successfully integrated over 1.4 million women into local panchayats and urban bodies.
- **Political Empowerment:** Forces political parties to actively recruit, train, and field female candidates in winnable mainstream seats.

Challenges

- **Implementation Delay:** The clause tying the law to the next census and delimitation means the quota will not realistically take effect for several years.
- **No OBC Sub-Quota:** Excludes women from Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and vertical religious minorities from having a dedicated sub-reservation, drawing sharp criticism from opposition groups.
- **The "Proxy" Risk:** Raises concerns that male politicians may field their wives or female relatives as proxy candidates (*Panchayat Pati* syndrome) to retain power in rotated seats.
- **Reduced Voter Choice:** Restricts voter choices in one-third of all constituencies, as voters in those zones can only elect female candidates.
- **Weakened Accountability:** Rotating seats every delimitation cycle might reduce a legislator's incentive to work hard for their current constituency, knowing they cannot run there in the next term.

10. Conclusion

The history of the Women's Reservation Bill reflects the gradual evolution of India's democratic commitment to gender equality. Beginning with the optimism of the Constituent Assembly,



United International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (UIJMR)

An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN: 3048-6726 www.ujmr.in Impact Factor: 6.934 (SJIF) Vol-3, Issue-1 ; Jan, Feb & Mar, 2026

reinforced by international movements and the success of local government reservations, the proposal endured decades of political negotiation before becoming law in 2023. The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023 (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam) marks a landmark achievement in constitutional governance by institutionalizing women's legislative representation. However, its transformative potential will ultimately depend on timely implementation, inclusive representation, and the ability of women legislators to influence public policy and democratic governance.

References

- Baxi, Upendra. 2010. *The Future of Human Rights*. Oxford University Press.
- Basu, Durga Das. 2023. *Introduction to the Constitution of India*. 27th ed. LexisNexis.
- Government of India. 1992. *The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992*.
- Government of India. 1992. *The Constitution (Seventy-Fourth Amendment) Act, 1992*.
- Government of India. 2023. *The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023 (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam)*.
- Kumar, Radha. 1993. *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800–1990*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Ministry of Women and Child Development. Various Reports on Women's Political Empowerment.
- National Commission for Women. 2010. *Report on Women's Political Participation*.
- United Nations. 1979. *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)*.
- United Nations. 1995. *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*.
- Election Commission of India. Various years. *Statistical Reports on General Elections to the Lok Sabha*.